Preface

Although books like this are written in the quiet of libraries and archives, the author does not, of course, live in isolation. Much has been written in recent decades about the scientific impossibility of objective historiography and the inevitable influence of the author's literary inclinations, for example toward tragedy or farce—certainly too much. These possible influences are joined by the author's possible political influences and, of course, the impression of current political developments. While this was being written in recent years, news of a crisis in the European Union arrived practically every day. There was talk of Germany having developed too much political and economic weight, while others had the impression that the Federal Republic of Germany was being exploited economically by its neighbors and was becoming a state without influence. Accordingly, something like the "German question" was once again on the agenda, and occasionally even, at least rhetorically, as a question of war and peace. The larger of the two comparatively modest successor states to the German Reich, whose foreign policy prior to 1945 will be described below, was suspected by some of seeking hegemony in Europe. High-ranking politicians of this state occasionally hinted that the dispute over this issue could possibly escalate into military conflict.

It is difficult to say whether these impressions influenced the portrayal in any way. In any case, it was not intentional. After all, the political biography of Joachim von Ribbentrop from 1933 to 1945 described here is also a treatise on mutual mistrust and the resulting misunderstandings. Although both were based on very different reasons in the ideologically charged era of the world wars, this is, to a certain extent, a timeless problem in international politics, which is becoming increasingly acute with the threatening collapse of the existing international order. In this case, the "realist school" of foreign policy interpretation, with its basic assumption of international anarchy, tends to arrive at more accurate descriptions than the assumptions of value-driven foreign policy and the general validity of international law. Such assumptions and the norms derived from them often merely represent the expression of the hegemony of individual states, which become questionable with the decline of this hegemony. What follows here is a "realistic" portrayal of German foreign policy during the National Socialist era based on the biography of Joachim von Ribbentrop. This has nothing to do with the problems of European policy mentioned above.

This is inevitable insofar as European policy in recent decades has officially been based on the fundamental assumption that Germany pursued an unprovoked and unlimited policy of war in the years leading up to 1945, which was responsible for the war of 1939. This fundamental assumption has proven to be incorrect. In this respect, this is inevitably a political book.

I would like to thank the staff at the various libraries and archives who made this possible, namely the University Library of Mannheim, the Federal Archives in Koblenz, and the Political Archives of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. I would especially like to thank the Erich and Erna Kronauer Foundation for its financial support of this work, as well as Dr. Florian Simon for his kind willingness to include the text in the Duncker & Humblot publishing program.

Stefan Scheil

Table of Contents

I. Facts and Conjectures about Ribbentrop – The State of Research 13

II. Man – Nationalist – National Socialist 23

1. About the person and how he saw the world 23
2. The analogy of national awakening 34
3. Economic issues 38
4. Ribbentrop and early National Socialism 44

III. Ambassador behind the scenes 53

1. Between London and Paris 53
2. The 1935 Naval Agreement 61
3. How to invite a prime minister—and fail 70

IV. Decision in London 80

1. From Hoesch to Ribbentrop 80
2. Conditions in London 87
3. Questions of style in an imperial era 94
4. Nevile Henderson – Ambassador without a power base 104

V. Alone among diplomats – Ribbentrop and the Foreign Office 116

1. Hitler's "rubbish heap of intelligence" 116
2. The Office, Its Organization, and the Minister 123
3. The minister and his state secretary 126
4. The lawyer and his change of heart 139

VI. The ultimate goal of a Greater German nation state: The Hitler-Ribbentrop Program 1937/38 142

1. The Bülow Memorandum of 1933 142
2. Ribbentrop's assessment and prognosis 146
3. Hitler's ultimate goals: The Hoßbach Protocol 152

VII. Foreign Minister for deterrence 164

1. Risk considerations 164

2. Prague and world politics 180

3. Ribbentrop's reports on the impending war 197

4. Program fulfilled: Greater German nation-state for one year 210

5. The failure of deterrence 223

6. Ribbentrop's Soviet card 238

VIII. Diplomacy for the sake of appearances 250

1. Conference or war 250

2. Diplomatic hearing impairments 269

3. The alibi – a review 276

IX. At the heart of the war of extermination 281

1. Ribbentrop vs. Chamberlain – Exchange of blows over guilt and trust 281

2. American conditions 286

3. Ribbentrop, the office, and the compromise peace 294

4. Secular Negotiations with the World Revolution 302

5. The Second American-German War 314

X. Interim assessment: The Foreign Office, the Minister, and the Holocaust 319

XI. Politics in times of war 328

1. Europe as a refuge 328

2. Stockholm Peace Contacts 342

3. Goebbels vs. Ribbentrop 350

4. Look under every stone 357

XII. Fiasco 365

Selected bibliography 370

1. Joachim von Ribbentrop's own writings, forewords, and speeches 370
2. Unpublished sources 370
3. Magazines 373
4. Printed sources, document editions, and encyclopedias 374
5. Memoirs, memoirs, and diaries 377
6. Contemporary political and historical writings 381
7. Secondary literature 385

Index of persons 403

List of abbreviations

AA	Federal Foreign Office
ADAP	Files on German Foreign Policy AJC
	American Jewish Committee
BA	Federal Archives
BA-MA	Federal Archives Military Archives
BDFA	British Documents on Foreign Affairs
CHAR	Chartwell Papers
DBFP	Documents on British Foreign Policy
DDF	French Diplomatic Documents
DDI	Italian Diplomatic Documents
DDP	Documents on German Policy
DNB	German News Agency
Doc.	Document
Doc.	Document
DR	Ribbentrop Office
DVP	Foreign policy documents
EZI	Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel
FO	Foreign Office
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States GWU
	History in Science and Teaching Ed.
	Publisher
Published	Published
HZ	Historical Journal
IfZ	Institute for Contemporary History
IMT	International Military Tribunal
KTB	War diary
MGFA	Military History Research Office MWT
	Central European Business Day
OKW	High Command of the Wehrmacht
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe PA-AA
	Political Archive, Foreign Office
PRO	Public Record Office London
SKL	Naval Warfare Command
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics VB
	Völkischer Beobachter

I. Facts and Conjectures about Ribbentrop – The state of research

At the beginning of any research project, there is always the question of what new insights can be gained. What can a political biography of Joachim von Ribbentrop achieve that others have not already achieved? The answer to this question can initially be given on two levels. One concerns the overall picture of the era: there are numerous inaccurate ideas about both the policies for which von Ribbentrop was personally responsible and the international relations of his time. This has already been explained in the publications presented by the author of these lines and corrected in a multi-volume overview.[1] The biographical study presented here is also based on this preliminary work and examines this period from the perspective of a single individual. This perspective brings to the fore some facts that have received less attention to date, while others that did not affect Joachim von Ribbentrop as a person recede into the background. Once again, however, it will become clear at this level to what extent German foreign policy had to reckon with the goals and threats of other states and that it reacted much more often than it acted.

The second level is that of the person in their environment. Joachim von Ribbentrop's political life and actions reveal several phenomena and developments that are typical of the time. On the one hand, there is the phenomenon of the career changer in politics, who entered the political leadership of National Socialism relatively late and as an outsider. At that time, as a wholesale merchant, he had built up his fortune and social position to the point of extensive independence. However, he had not been active in party politics until then. Everything suggests that JvR – as we will occasionally refer to him – would have continued to run his business as a private individual in less politically turbulent times than those between 1929 and 1932. However, as these times were turbulent and uncertain, he apparently made himself available to the National Socialists out of a mixture of ambition and national sentiment, which was not unusual for the time. The prevailing impression in Germany was that

---

[1] In particular in the four volumes: Logic of Power – Europe's Problem with the Globalization of Politics, Berlin 1999; Five Plus Two, The European Nation States, the World Powers, and the United Unleashing of World War II, Berlin 2009; 1940/41 – The Escalation of World War II, Berlin 2011; Churchill, Hitler, and Anti-Semitism – The German Dictatorship, Its Political Opponents, and the European Crisis of 1938/39, Berlin 2009.

the old elites, both those of the Wilhelmine era and those of the Weimar Republic, had led the German nation state into a hopeless situation. The war from 1914 to 1918 had been lost, as had the peace from 1919 to 1929. The "national uprising," as the rise of National Socialism was widely interpreted at the time and also perceived by itself, seemed to offer a way out. Those who could not view this positively, but rather as an expression of a hopeless situation, found their mood reflected in the NSDAP's election campaign strategy. "Our last hope: Hitler" was the slogan of the 1932 presidential election campaign, with posters showing gray and emaciated figures from all walks of life. This was never enough to secure a majority of votes for the NSDAP, not even in this presidential election campaign, but it did allow the National Socialist Party to penetrate all social classes and milieus. From an electoral sociological perspective, it thus became the first German people's party and, for many, including Joachim von Ribbentrop, it actually embodied a national awakening. From the outset, Ribbentrop was clearly particularly attracted to the foreign policy aspect of this new beginning. This account will therefore be based on presenting Ribbentrop's policies as part of the attempt by Hitler, as head of government, state, and party, to restore the German Reich within its historical borders under National Socialist auspices, i.e., roughly within the borders of the German Confederation until 1866. This intention to establish a German central state in Central Europe, the likes of which had never been seen before, naturally presented the European community of states with a problem of acceptance. It also found militant opponents, including in Great Britain, as Ribbentrop himself experienced firsthand.

These opponents included influential historical politicians such as Winston Churchill, who later became Prime Minister during the war. The diverse roles he assumed as party politician, First Lord of the Admiralty, minister, head of government, publicist, and world-renowned historian in his own right symbolize the remarkable peculiarity of the World War era from 1914 to 1945, which was more than any previous military conflict prepared for and followed up on in the public eye. This, combined with the dramatic impressions of the European and ultimately world war since 1939, has largely caused the mutual political intentions in the pre-war period up to 1939 to be forgotten. This development was further accelerated by the internationally coordinated education and training policy after 1960, in which recent German history was firmly established as an illegitimate "Sonderweg" (special path). A rea-

---

[2] http://www.annefrank.org/de/Subsites/Zeitleiste-/Zwischenkriegszeit-1918–1939/Anne-Franks-Geburt/1932/Ein-Naziplakat-fur-die-Wahl-des-Reichsprasidenten-Der-Text-lautet-Unsere-letzte-Hoffnung-Hitler/#!/de/Subsites/Timeline-/Interwar-Period-1918-1939/Anne-Frank's-Birth/1932/A-Nazi-Poster-for-the-Election-of-the-Reich-President-The-Text-reads-Our-Last-Hope-Hitler/.

[3] Cf. *Falter*, Wähler, p. 371.

There was no place in it for a realistic assessment of German threats and objectives. Previous descriptions of Ribbentrop's personality and politics therefore suffer from the usual shortcomings of research literature on National Socialist foreign policy. Many, and especially the particularly influential, accounts are based on unproven, axiomatic assumptions about Hitler's step-by-step plans for world conquest. In this imaginary world, Nazi-ruled Germany launched an unprovoked war of conquest in 1939. This assumption also pervades most biographical attempts about Joachim von Ribbentrop.

On the other hand, many details in these accounts by the Reich Foreign Minister can be attributed to the aftereffects of deliberate, personally and politically motivated animosity. In order to limit the consequences of this source situation, the following will refrain from giving hearsay information the weight it has often been given in the literature to date. One might consider this reduced weighting to be a matter of course, but many authors have a strong tendency to rely on such information. Third-, fourth-, or fifth-hand rumors are a frequent and prominent phenomenon in research literature. This also applies to supposedly central sources relating to Joachim von Ribbentrop, such as the memoirs and notes of Ernst von Weizsäcker or Theodor Kordt.

There have been many different attempts to understand JvR as a person, his political concepts, and his policies. The first attempts naturally took place in the period up to 1945, when Ribbentrop, as foreign policy advisor to the German head of state and then as his ambassador and foreign minister, was portrayed negatively, mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries, due to current political interests. Surprisingly, there are no German biographical attempts from this period that sought to counter this. Ribbentrop himself occasionally authorized a short autobiographical sketch for press purposes, but more comprehensive accounts were only presented by his opponents. Douglas Glen's pamphlet, published in London in 1940 under the title "Ribbentrop is still dangerous," was followed in 1943 by Paul Schwarz's somewhat more sophisticated biography, "This Man Ribbentrop – His Life and Times," published in New York.[4] As the place and time of publication and the title suggest, Glen's "Ribbentrop" is a piece of English propaganda written for mobilization purposes, which seeks to popularize the dangerousness, unscrupulousness, and radicalism of the German foreign minister through anecdotes and insinuations. Of course, for Glen, Ribbentrop is one of the main culprits of the 1939 war. But he also portrays Ribbentrop as a saboteur and German secret agent since the days of the First World War, whose stay in Canada before 1914 in

[4] *Douglas Glen*: Ribbentrop is still dangerous, London 1940; *Paul Schwarz*: This man Ribbentrop, New York 1943.

is presented as pure espionage activity in a purely fictional manner. Together with Gerhard von Gunther's "Von Ribbentrop" from the series "How they did it," Oswald Dutch's[5] "Hitler's Twelve Apostles" and H. W. Blood-Ryan's "Franz von Papen," Glen's work is one of those that Michael Bloch rightly describes as "complete nonsense."[6]

As a former German port consul in New York, Paul Schwarz was able to draw on his insider knowledge and connections to the Foreign Office and the traditional conservative leadership in Germany. This enabled him to write a detailed account that had a major influence on the image of Ribbentrop in later historiography. Now However, "detailed" is by no means synonymous with "knowledgeable," and so it must be noted that although Schwarz was quite familiar with prewar Germany, when it came to Ribbentrop, he mainly presented the third-hand rumors mentioned above. Moreover, they were selected in such a way as to fulfill the purpose of an indictment, as expressly stated by Schwarz. In this respect, his biographical attempt cannot be classified as an objective account. Schwarz apparently ignored disturbing positive information about Ribbentrop, such as that provided by Wolfgang Stresemann, the son of the former German foreign minister. Stresemann felt, in his own estimation, that he was in a position to "help Schwarz in some respects, since the future Nazi foreign minister frequented my parents' house and at that time showed no tendency toward
'Third Reich', and wrote a warm letter of condolence on the death of my father."[7] Such information was omitted from the Ribbentrop biography that Schwarz ultimately presented.

Historiography itself took its time researching Nazi foreign policy and the minister in charge. As is well known, in Germany, the archive material of the Foreign Office, which had been confiscated by the Allies in 1945 and only reluctantly returned, was not even available until the 1960s. It was only when the Allies published their edition of the files on German foreign policy that archival material became available in published form – provided historians were prepared to accept the selection and authenticity of the edition. Previously, historians had to rely on the memoirs available at the time, the prosecution material from the Nuremberg trials, and the files and documents published by the German side until 1945, but there was apparently little inclination to do so.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the well-known controversies about the outbreak of war in 1939 arose, which at least marginally also affected the image

---

[5] The name *Oswald Dutch* was a pseudonym for *Otto Erich Deutsch* (1894–1983), an opponent of the Nazis who emigrated in 1938 after the annexation of Austria and returned to work as a journalist in the Federal Republic after 1945.

[6] See *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 459.

[7] See *Stresemann*, Zeiten, p. 210.

Joachim von Ribbentrop. However, A. J. P. Taylor and David Hoggan on the one hand, and Walther Hofer on the other, concentrated on the person of the head of state when writing about Nazi decision-making. Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop took a back seat to Hitler, seen by Hofer as the executive arm of a supposedly fixed program, and by Taylor and Hoggan as an associate of a vacillating or even war-driven dictator. E. M. Robertson can be considered the first to attribute to Ribbentrop his own conception of foreign policy, which stood in some contrast to this "program."[8] This led to prompt criticism in Germany from the academic establishment, which at that time had its most prominent representatives in Hans-Adolf Jacobsen and Andreas Hillgruber. Both were leading figures in the project to establish the astonishing claim in contemporary historical research that Hitler had a "step-by-step plan" for world conquest. This claim is astonishing because, on closer inspection, it quickly becomes apparent that the references to a step-by-step plan for the conquest of the USSR, a Hitler "program" for the conquest of living space, or even a "world blitzkrieg" are based on mere conjecture. This has occasionally been explicitly acknowledged by the protagonists themselves in relevant standard works. There is no "source evidence" for Hitler's "step-by-step plans" for achieving world domination, as Andreas Hillgruber himself wrote in "Hitler's Strategy."[9] This did not prevent him from making the phantom of these unverifiable step-by-step plans the leitmotif of his postdoctoral thesis, establishing this together with Jacobsen, among others, as the standard for research, and, against this background, criticizing Robertson for not taking Hitler's "basic plan" for foreign policy sufficiently into account and therefore overestimating Ribbentrop's influence. [10]

We will see that Hitler's basic foreign policy plan in 1938/39 coincided with what he told Joachim von Ribbentrop to do when he took office as foreign minister. He wanted to enforce territorial changes with regard to Austria, Czechoslovakia, the Memel Territory, and Danzig. These were the substantive goals that Ribbentrop was to pursue and did pursue. They were embedded in the ongoing attempt to persuade the international community to accept these border changes, although the manner of this acceptance was not specified. Bilateral alliances

---

[8] See *Esmonde Manning Robertson*: Hitler's Pre-War Policy and Military Plans 1933–1939, London 1963.

[9] Cf. *Hillgruber*, Strategy, p. 37. At no point during his reign did *Hitler* explicitly speak of wanting to conquer living space in Russia, either publicly or in secret. *Jürgen Förster* also noted this in the Military History Research Office's account of the attack on Russia. Cf. *Förster*, Decision, p. 16 and
p. 18 ff.

[10] See the review by *Andreas Hillgruber* in: NPL 10 (1965), p. 466.

Hitler and Ribbentrop considered agreements with England or Italy to be just as possible as multilateral conferences involving other important states, including the Soviet Union. The ambivalence in their attitude toward the international community was particularly evident in the case of Great Britain. In 1938/39, Ribbentrop pursued a policy that was expressly intended to deter this country from attacking Germany. However, he did not rule out the possibility of concluding a bilateral alliance between Berlin and London once deterrence had been achieved and Germany's territorial revision program had been completed. This should be emphasized at this point, since further studies on Ribbentrop's policy also assume a strong axiomatic fixation on war on the part of either Hitler or Ribbentrop, which cannot be proven in the sources and is therefore repeatedly imposed on them in a speculative manner.

At that time in the 1960s, the name Ribbentrop made headlines in a new way, as the government of the German Democratic Republic used it as a cue to claim an alleged continuity between the Federal Republic and the Third Reich, linking this to various individuals from the Foreign Office.[11] "From Ribbentrop to Adenauer" was translated into all the world's languages. When Chancellor Kiesinger took office, the GDR reignited the debate by publishing a pamphlet tailored to the new chancellor, which also made use of the name Ribbentrop.[12] This period also saw numerous new editions and translations initiated by East Berlin of the memoir "Unterwegs nach Deutschland" (On the Way to Germany) by Wolfgang Gans Edler Herr zu Putlitz, which had already been published in the 1950s. Putlitz also held a post at the German embassy in London during Ribbentrop's term of office and, according to his own statements, actively engaged in espionage there together with Robert Vansittart and the former long-time German embassy employee Jona von Ustinov([13]) to bring about the downfall of the Chamberlain government. During the war, he reportedly worked for Sefton Delmer's propaganda department.His memoirs, published in large print runs by Verlag der Nation, were designed as a polemic against Western capitalist militarism, which he claimed had enabled the National Socialists to rise to power, while Stalin, thanks to the non-aggression pact with Germany, was still described as "the great statesman" in the 1967 edition.

---

[11] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the German Democratic Republic (ed.): From Ribbentrop to Adenauer, (East) Berlin 1961.

[12]From Ribbentrop's Ministry to the Office of the Federal Chancellor, Berlin (State Publishing House of the GDR) 1968.

[13] *Jona Freiherr von Ustinov*, also known as *Klop Ustinov*, (1892–1962), born in Jaffa, decorated German fighter pilot during World War I, father of *Peter Ustinov*.

[14] Cf. *Putlitz*, Unterwegs, cf. for *Vansittart-Ustinow* p. 210 f., p. 229, p. 239 ff., and for *Sefton Delmer*, see pp. 328 ff.

of our time." [15] Putlitz exerted some influence on the public image of Ribbentrop. [16]

Wolfgang Michalka's dissertation on "Ribbentrop and German World Politics" represented a significant leap forward in research into Ribbentrop's politics. Michalka deliberately avoided attempting to paint a "political portrait" of Ribbentrop, instead limiting himself to describing Ribbentrop's conception of England and its role in the Third Reich's decision-making process. In doing so, he sketched out figures with alternative political concepts: Hjalmar Schacht as a liberal imperialist, Ernst von Weizsäcker as a traditional great power politician, and Hermann Göring as a Wilhelmine jack-of-all-trades politician. Michalka ultimately attributed to Ribbentrop a leading role in Hitler's shift to an anti-English policy in 1938/39, which he believed he had identified. Unfortunately, Michalka largely ignored the political actions of the powers surrounding Germany and followed the aforementioned fictional interpretation of Hitler as a dictator with dogmatically fixed goals of world conquest who, however – in departure from contemporary ideas – was "never solely responsible for German foreign policy."[18] Thus the dictator's policies were framed by other concepts, including those of Ribbentrop, without Michalka being prepared to question the dictator's alleged long-term goals.

The upheaval of 1989/90 and German reunification reignited the debate about former German foreign policy and Germany's role in the international system. This led to a series of studies devoted to Joachim von Ribbentrop more than a decade after Michalka. Since the upheaval in Eastern Europe made it possible for the first time since 1939 to have a real debate about the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of that year, better known in Eastern Europe as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Ribbentrop became the focus of several foreign-language publications.

---

[15] "Now the tables had turned, not as *Chamberlain* had imagined during his fishing trips in Scotland. England had to step up itself to tear the mad dog *Hitler* to pieces." Quoted from *Putlitz*, Unterwegs, p. 256.

([16])The obvious political purpose and imaginative embellishments of the text devalue it as a source. *Putlitz* invents a "secret decree" *by Ribbentrop* from the spring of 1939, which was allegedly signed by *Ernst von Weizsäcker* and supposedly read: "If any of my people make even the slightest disparaging remark, I will summon them to my office and shoot them with my own hand." Quoted in *Putlitz,* Unterwegs, p. 254. ([17]) *Wolfgang Michalka:* Ribbentrop and German World Politics 1933–1940 – Foreign Policy Concepts and Decision-Making Processes in the Third Reich, Munich 1980.

[18] Cf. *Michalka*, Ribbentrop, p. 306.

[19] In a sense, one can speak of a flood of publications. See, for example: *Karol Grünberg*: Joachim von Ribbentrop, Bydgoszcz (Bromberg) 1991; *Zbigniew Jerzy Hirsz*: Państwo polskie po układzie Ribbentrop-Mołotov, Białystok, 1991; *Ljudmila B. Čërnaja:* Koričnevye diktatory, Rostov-na-Donu: Izdat. Feniks, 1999; *Marek Kornat,* Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotov, Warsaw: Polski Inst. Spraw Miedzynarodowych, 2002.

In addition, the source situation changed. In the mid-1980s, the USSR admitted the existence of the secret additional protocol to the non-aggression pact, which had always been disputed until then, with its demarcations of the mutual German-Soviet spheres of interest. Studies that took up this point portrayed the foreign minister in a conventional manner as the executor of Hitler's alleged policy of aggression, who, however, as memoirs from the Soviet era had repeatedly claimed, was ultimately opposed to the German attack on the USSR.

Unfortunately, John Weitz's 1992 study of JvR as "Hitler's Diplomat" proved largely irrelevant. The author does make an almost heroic claim:

> "This biography took me from the archives of the Foreign Ministry in Bonn to archives all over Europe. I chased Ribbentrop's ghost across the mountains of Austria to London, Berlin, Nuremberg, Hamburg, and Washington, D.C."[20]

On closer inspection, there is not a single reference to a single archival source in any city throughout the entire book, not even a single cross-reference to the published files of any foreign ministry, be it German, British, or American. Weitz wrote along the lines of the most questionable parts of the existing memoir literature, compressing, so to speak, the sum of the omissions and errors found in previous accounts. In this respect, no value is placed on his study here.

The aforementioned Michael Bloch attempted to write a comprehensive biography of Ribbentrop in the early 1990s. As a lawyer and experienced author of several biographies, including one on Edward VIII and another on the entourage of the abdicated English king, he presented the material in a compelling manner. As a side effect of this form of presentation, however, his "Ribbentrop" contained novelistic features with countless, naturally unprovable assertions about what Ribbentrop or others may have thought about this or that point at the time. He also refrained from conducting his own archival research or incorporating the latest research findings, and thus remained uninnovative in this respect. Nevertheless, despite such shortcomings, his study is a remarkable attempt. However, precisely because of his obvious ignorance of the European conditions at the time and his failure to take into account crucial documents, such as Ribbentrop's final report as ambassador to London in December 1937, it paints a completely false picture of the goals of German foreign policy in 1938/39.

Almost simultaneously with Bloch, the Stuttgart historian Stefan Kley wrote his dissertation on "Hitler, Ribbentrop, and the

---

[20] Quoted from *Weitz*, Diplomat, p. XV.
[21] *Michael Bloch*: Ribbentrop, London 1994.

Unleashing World War II."[22]Unlike Bloch, Kley conducted intensive archival research, particularly at the Foreign Office. He limited himself to describing the years 1938 and 1939. Similar to Michalka, he emphasized differences in the concepts of Hitler and Ribbentrop, but adhered to the axiom of a unilateral desire for war that existed only in Germany and could be found there in the dictator. Hitler had pursued this goal of starting a war uninterruptedly, but according to Kley, he had to conceal it from all his staff, including Ribbentrop, as well as in speeches, directives, and orders because of its explosive nature. Thus, despite some merits, Kley's investigation once again turned into a phantom hunt, and "probably" became one of the most frequently used words in it, as he felt compelledwas forced to make this assertion, which could not be substantiated from the sources, plausible by claiming that, in his opinion, Hitler "probably" meant either something else or the opposite of what he said or wrote. In this context, Joachim von Ribbentrop appears as the one who "probably" suspected what Hitler really wanted, rejected it, but could not prevent it. Most recently, Vasilij Molodjakov published a comprehensive study on Joachim von Ribbentrop.(23) In the title, he describes the minister as generally "headstrong" and highlights Ribbentrop's advocacy of the continental bloc as contrasting with other views held by the Nazi leadership. This, too, represents a significant correction to the conventional image of the foreign minister.

Apart from these studies on Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Ribbentrop family also spoke out on several occasions. Ribbentrop's publications from the Nazi era were initially classified in 1945 as "literature to be discarded."[24]However, while still in prison in Nuremberg, Ribbentrop wrote his memoirs under the title "Between London and Moscow," which dealt with both his own political activities as a diplomat and the situation in Germany in general. Despite the difficult circumstances under which the memoirs had to be written during the trial, without access to documents and under the shadow of a impending death sentence, they are a valuable source and more than just a defense brief. In addition to Ribbentrop, his wife Annelies also wrote several volumes in the 1950s and 1960s in which she discussed his foreign policy and the connections between conspiratorial circles in the Foreign Office and potential German enemies in the run-up to the outbreak of war in 1939. Her accounts clearly reveal her enthusiasm for her husband, but these extensive publications are also thoroughly factual.

---

[22]*Stefan Kley*: Hitler, Ribbentrop, and the Unleashing of World War II, Paderborn 1996.

[23]*Vasilij Ė. Molodjakov*: Ribbentrop – uprjamyj sovetnik fjurera, Moscow 2008, 494 pp.

[24] Item 9498 on the corresponding list: *Ribbentrop,* Joachim von: Complete Writings. http://www.polunbi.de/bibliothek/1946-nslit-r.html.

[25] Most recently, Ribbentrop's son Rudolf published a biographical and autobiographical sketch of the minister's life and thinking and his era under the title "Mein Vater Joachim von Ribbentrop" (My Father Joachim von Ribbentrop), which also serves as a presentation of his political principles.

[25] *Wolfgang Michalka* described the value of the documents published by *Annelies von Ribbentrop* as "questionable" without providing any further explanation. In fact, he later classifies them as an "essential addition" to the available source material. See *Michalka*, Ribbentrop, p. 22.

II. Man – Nationalist – National Socialist

1. About the person and how she saw the world

> During our conversation, Ribbentrop attempted to ascertain who Bernadotte was, who was behind him, and what he ultimately wanted to achieve apart from rescuing the Scandinavians from the collapsing Reich. Meanwhile, I found a small leather bag filled with papers in the cushions of my armchair. When I took it out, Bernadotte's passport fell into my hand. 'What do you have there?' asked the Reich Foreign Minister. 'The wallet of your last guest.' I handed it to him.
>
> What would happen now? Ribbentrop was not a private citizen. He was the foreign minister of a state fighting for its life. His guest was also not a private citizen, but a politician on an extremely delicate mission. He had, as they said, been in London shortly before. He did not go (first) to the Foreign Office, but to the Reichsführer SS. Ribbentrop, however, took the wallet stuffed with papers, stood up without hesitation, went to his desk, put the bag in a large private envelope, which he sealed and handed back to me with the words: 'Please return Mr. Bernadotte's wallet to him quickly. He will miss it.'"
>
> Peter Kleist[1]

Those who knew him personally describe Ribbentrop—with either positive or negative connotations—as an emotional, or one might say sensitive, person with artistic inclinations. He played the violin and had even toyed with the idea of making it his profession. He spoke fluent, accent-free English and French, which even his opponents acknowledged, and despite his sensitivity, he was not without personal courage. During World War I, for example, he undertook an adventurous journey as a stowaway from North America to Germany in order to join the war effort there. The "Deutschland über Alles"

---

[1] Quoted from *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 222 f.

[2] *Ribbentrop* returned to Germany in August 1914, joined the 12th Hussar Regiment as a volunteer ensign, and was promoted to lieutenant in 1915. He took part in his regiment's combat operations on the Western and Eastern Fronts until the end of 1917, was wounded, and received the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class. From spring 1918 until the armistice, he was adjutant to the representative of the War Ministry in Constantinople, where he met the future Reich Chancellor *Franz von Papen*. See *Papen,* Gasse, p. 265. At the beginning of 1919, *Ribbentrop* was assigned to the Versailles Peace Commission in the same capacity, "where he experienced his first impressions of the catastrophic consequences of the lost war and the Versailles Dictate." See PA-AA R 27157, Ribbentrop personal files, curriculum vitae template for article. See *Ribbentrop,* Memoirs, p. 30.

which had earned the Ribbentrops the Iron Cross in every generation since the wars against Napoleon, he had undoubtedly internalized. In addition, he apparently had a talent for motor skills, which was expressed not only in his violin playing, but also in more tangible activities such as Canadian ice hockey, which he became acquainted with in Canada in the years before World War I. In February 1914, he is even said to have taken part in a game between the Canadian national team and the United States, the "Ellis Memorial Trophy."[3] Even twenty years later, he still made an impression on some of his English interlocutors as being unusually "athletic" for a politician. [4] JvR had acquired his fortune himself after the war and, for example, when he was appointed foreign minister, he expressly emphasized that he did not want to profit financially from his new office. He had this stipulated in several decrees:

> "Neither the private capital available to the RAM or, after his death, to his family, shall be touched, nor shall there be any increase in private capital (with the exception of the one-time endowment of RM 500,000 given to the RAM by the Führer during the RAM's term of office)."[5]

To ensure the latter, Ribbentrop had his salary linked by the Foreign Office to the operating results of his wholesale company. If the operating results were good, his salary was reduced accordingly. Of course, given Ribbentrop's considerable private wealth and the endowments Hitler repeatedly distributed to generals, this financial restraint took place at a carefree level. Nevertheless, this is remarkable, if only because it contradicts some of the rumors spread about him regarding his origins.

---

[3] *Michael Bloch* asserts this fact, which is difficult for a non-Canadian and newcomer to believe, citing information from *Dennis Bird*, archivist of the National Skating Association of Great Britain. See *Bloch,* Ribbentrop, p. 7. *Ribbentrop* himself only touches on his ice hockey career in his memoirs, saying that he had "familiarized himself with the famous Canadian ice hockey." See *Ribbentrop,* Memoirs,
p. 20.

[4] However, his sporting appearance had quite ambivalent effects. *Ribbentrop* is said to have "Straightforward," "carefree," and making a "seaworthy impression," *Henry Channon* noted in May 1936, before concluding that *Ribbentrop* was too cordial and came across overall "like the captain of someone's yacht." See *Channon*, Diaries, p. 62.

[5] *Ribbentrop's* renewed decree on these property issues dated October 23, 1941. Cited in BA Koblenz N 1163/9, *Bredt* report dated March 14, 1943, p. 5. *Hitler's* tax-free endowment for his foreign minister dated April 5, 1939. This was later followed by a further endowment of the same amount. A final report on Ribbentrop's asset development between January 1, 1940, and January 1, 1945, found a "real change in value" of minus RM 7,200 for this period when comparing assets for the years from January 1, 1940, to January 1, 1945. These figures did not include Hitler's two endowments of RM 500,000 each, of which RM 535,671 was still in Ribbent
500,000 RM each, of which 535,671 RM remained in *Ribbentrop's* account as of December 31, 1944. See BA Koblenz N 1163/4, Deutsche Bank account statement dated January 16, 1945.

[6] See BA Koblenz N 1163/9, *Bredt* report dated March 14, 1943, p. 5.

personal enrichment and a life of luxury. Ribbentrop was also a family man, apparently a good father who was present for his children as much as possible, and a faithful husband to his wife. He betrayed neither his country nor his employer, but was one of the few who openly expressed his own dissenting opinion, even to the dictator, on dangerous issues such as the Nazi persecution of the Jews. To sum up, Ribbentrop is in many ways a sympathetic figure.

However, this personality actually attracted a great deal of hostility and personal insinuations. He was said to be vain, cowardly, stupid, and much more. Although the rumors about Ribbentrop's corruption and luxurious lifestyle repeatedly proved to be unfounded, they nevertheless resurfaced again and again until they finally became a major topic at the Nuremberg trials as part of the Allies' efforts to discredit him. Although objectively he was the most open to dissent and the most headstrong member of Hitler's entourage, he was nevertheless often portrayed as an uncritical yes-man to the dictator. One gets the impression that Ribbentrop must have had a manner that antagonized others. An analysis of the reasons for this circumstance can only be attempted in the context of a political biography. Perhaps it was precisely the contrast between Ribbentrop's internalized notions of bourgeois decency and the necessity of having to conceal these notions in the deeply indecent business of international politics – especially during the World War era – that led him to adopt a demeanor that often seemed insincere and exaggerated. This was then interrupted by completely different scenes in which Ribbentrop showed himself to be spontaneous, as expressed in the scene quoted at the beginning with the uncomplicated return of Count Bernadotte's wallet. Eyewitness Peter Kleist, incidentally, viewed this behavior in an extremely positive light, as "a small, perhaps insignificant gesture, but nevertheless a gesture of chivalry in the midst of a war of annihilation that had torn down all barriers."[8] Of course, the question arises as to whether, in view of Ribbentrop's responsibility in the face of defeat, as described by Kleist, it would not have been natural to at least look through these papers. This would have been appropriate if only because Bernadotte would not have been the first diplomat on a trip to "forget" his wallet in order to discreetly hand over a document without witnesses. Whether international business between European nation states was compatible with chivalry or not was fundamentally the best

---

([7])Typical of the unbroken desire for rumors in this area is the recent *Antje Vollmer* about *Hermann Göring's* alleged remark about *Ribbentrop's* marriage: "Ribbentrop married her money and she married his title." However, he already had his money before the wedding—but no title. See *Vollmer*, Doppelleben, p. 190.

[8] Cf. *Kleist*, Tragödie, p. 223.

It remained a constant question whether this was a matter of individuals who, under other circumstances, would correctly be referred to as "scoundrels," as Italy's Bismarck, the statesman Camillo di Cavour, once put it.[9] In fact both remained a constant feature of international politics on all sides. As far as Ribbentrop as a person was concerned, however, many personal insinuations against him had a direct political purpose, whether they came from outside or from within the regime.

Joachim von Ribbentrop interpreted foreign policy as a form of politics in which relations between states are understood as relationships between sovereign state entities, while their internal constitution is considered secondary to these relations. He repeatedly summarized the standard by which these relations should ideally be governed with the term "secular."[10] This principle presupposed the ability of different states to negotiate regardless of any ideological differences and thus belongs to the much-discussed realm of the "realist school" of diplomacy and diplomatic history. Foreign policy and internal constitution are considered separately from one another. From this perspective, harmony in international relations is not decisively influenced by shared values and culture, nor by non-governmental interests such as trade associations. State policy takes precedence. Its goal is to maintain and expand its own position of power within an environment that is fundamentally anarchic, i.e., governed neither by international law nor by the hegemony of a single entity.

At the time, this view naturally stood in contrast to the rhetoric that had developed in the United States since 1917, which advocated "making the world safe" for a single domestic political concept, democracy, and, as a prerequisite for this, creating binding international law and an organization such as the League of Nations to enforce it. However, the US itself did not ultimately join the League of Nations, which it had co-founded. In practice, it had proved to be less a means of enforcing equal rights for all and more a means of conveniently realizing the national interests of the influential victorious powers, above all the two Western powers, Great Britain and France. Its existence therefore did not seem to contradict the views of the realist school, but rather to confirm their value once again. The formal

At the beginning of the 1930s, the "idealistic" international order was therefore on the brink of collapse, both materially and intellectually, due to its internal contradictions and the global economic crisis, which had already helped the last governments of the Weimar period achieve some foreign policy successes.

---

[9] "If we did for ourselves what we do for our country, what scoundrels we would be!" Cf. *Ingrimm*, Auflösung, p. 7.

[10] For example, during the negotiations on the non-aggression pact and the Molotov talks in November 1940.

Diplomacy, understood as contact between influential and responsible persons in the respective states, thus became the central instrument in Ribbentrop's foreign policy strategy. This was in line with the principles largely followed by the Foreign Office as an institution. As a result, German foreign policy during the Nazi era can be described at this level. We can therefore follow Ribbentrop's path as a private traveling diplomat, head of the Ribbentrop office, and later foreign minister, and mention the vague foreign policy activities of other National Socialist agencies only in passing. This is obvious in the context of a biography and also well-founded in substance. In his study on "Ribbentrop and World Politics," Wolfgang Michalka also came to the conclusion that Ribbentrop could just as well have headed the Foreign Ministry under Wilhelm II. This is correct insofar as he did not regard foreign policy as the implementation of ideological guidelines, nor as the practice of international solidarity among the respective ruling strata or certain classes. At the center of Ribbentrop's foreign policy thinking were states as power states. They acted as players on the political stage, represented by individuals, but also subject to the constraints and traditions of power-political competition. This had direct consequences for his relationship to supranational structures such as the League of Nations, which existed at the time. In his political conceptions, they played a subordinate role to the bilateral relations of individual countries. This contributed to Ribbentrop's ability to conclude the Anti-Comintern Pact against the Communist International as a multinational agreement. In doing so, he at least appeared to accommodate the National Socialists' self-image as an anti-communist movement, while in fact he was working with the help of this pact to create an anti-British deterrent coalition. In view of further British policy, he soon became a staunch advocate of the continental bloc concept, in which the Soviet Union, whether communist or not, was even planned as a central element alongside Japan, Italy, and Germany. Ribbentrop called this, as mentioned, ge-

---

[11] *Hans Adolf Jacobsen*, on the other hand, stated in the preface to his monograph on National Socialist foreign policy that "the diplomatic relations of the Third Reich represent only one aspect of the whole." See *Jacobsen*, Außenpolitik, p. XVIII. The subsequent abandonment of diplomatic history as an allegedly inadequate method for describing National Socialist foreign policy, accompanied by the exclusion of diplomatic steps taken abroad, which was proclaimed not only by *Jacobsen*, was a mistake that greatly contributed to irrational ideas about this policy and the fixation of research on unverifiable axiomatic ideas *of Hitler* and his entourage. Even at the institutional level, *Jacobsen* ultimately had to acknowledge that the NSDAP's foreign organization (AO), which he had studied extensively, had "no influence on the foreign policy decision-making process until 1938." In fact, even after this period, the AO played less of an effective political role than that of a welcome bogeyman of a German "fifth column," which could often be put to good use in anti-Nazi public relations work abroad. See *Jacobsen,* Außenpolitik,
p. 602.

He occasionally pursued a policy based on "secular standards," and it was undoubtedly one of the tragedies of his political approach that he had to conduct foreign policy at a time when, after a renaissance in the first half of the 1930s, secular standards were increasingly being overshadowed by ideological objectives and convictions of the most radical kind.

Born in 1893, Ribbentrop clearly no longer belonged to the "generation of the unconditional" born in 1900 and later, who had no front-line war experience and who would later make the ideological extreme decisions in the SS leadership, starting with SS chief Himmler himself.[12]It was precisely this group, which had been just a little too young for the battlefields of the First World War, that provided the regime's most radical functionaries. This was one of the reasons why Ribbentrop soon found himself in fundamental conflict with their methods and goals after the outbreak of war.

The 1930s and 1940s can be characterized as a period of transition, during which doubts about these power-political methods began to grow in the imperialist West. As mentioned above, the League of Nations, proclaimed after the First World War, functioned politically as a vehicle for French and British imperialism, while at the same time there was much talk of disarmament and international law. It was therefore a thoroughly cynical undertaking, rightly criticized in this respect, as part of the grandiose self-trivialization of Western Europe. On the other hand, however, the slogans of "democratization of the world" and "the war to end all wars" under which the First World War had been fought had left their mark. The proverbial imperialist jingoism of 19th-century English politics, which had waged war without hesitation or sold foreign countries and rights to third parties in order to make policy, was on the retreat. It still existed, but it was no longer openly acceptable. The British Empire was in the midst of an intellectual crisis that had affected the younger members of the government apparatus in particular, but which made it difficult to pursue a purely interest-driven foreign policy in the public eye. Ribbentrop's pragmatism also brought him into increasing conflict with Hitler's increasingly ideological actions after 1941, for example in the area of anti-Jewish policy or possible peace initiatives, but also with the parallel foreign policy pursued by SS chief Heinrich Himmler for ideological reasons. This conflict now leads to another area in which Ribbentrop's political life reveals a typical element of the National Socialist system of government, namely its polycracy. As a latecomer and career changer, JvR had the ear of the head of state and

---

[12]*Ribbentrop* is mentioned rather marginally by *Wildt*, without any attempt to flesh out his profile. From a generational perspective, *Wildt* points to *Hermann Göring*, also born in 1893, who "would have found a contemporary in *Arthur Nebe* at best" in the Reich Security Main Office. See *Wildt*, Generation, p. 45.

dictator, but ultimately only that. [13] He had to survive the competition between the ministries and parliamentary groups on this basis, which led to changing coalitions. From his perspective, the internal constitution of the regime resembled Germany's external situation. Germany was isolated and, in Ribbentrop's view, had to make a choice.

Under the conditions outlined above, Germany's foreign policy situation in 1932/33 was bound to be precarious. Without allies, without a functioning international security system, and with only rudimentary means of self-defense, the territory of the Weimar Republic in the middle of Europe was exposed to political pressure from all sides and even to the threat and repeated incursions of foreign armed forces. A repeat of this was only to be expected in extreme cases, but there had been several precedents since 1919, and even the possibility of this happening hampered everyday foreign policy at all levels at the beginning of the 1930s. In addition, from a pan-German perspective, significant parts of what was actually legitimate state territory had either been seceded (Danzig, Saarland, Austria) or were already occupied by foreign states as a result of the post-war provisions of the Treaty of Versailles (Upper Silesia, Sudetenland, Memel Territory, South Tyrol, North Schleswig). Prominent representatives of German politics from all parties also made open or covert claims to other areas that were at least historically German, such as Alsace, Bohemia, and Moravia outside the Sudetenland, West Prussia (i.e., the Polish "corridor"), and the former province of Posen.[14] This was part of the domestic and foreign policy environment in which the transition from the foreign policy of the Weimar Republic to National Socialist foreign policy took place from 1933 onwards.

As a continental state in the center of Europe, Germany had to avoid being threatened or even attacked militarily from several sides at once. Despite Germany's particularly central location, this "danger of encirclement" was not a situation specific to Germany, but could in principle affect any continental state, from France to Poland to the USSR, albeit to varying degrees. For international politics, which in the 1930s thought intensively in terms of historical analogies, historical examples were readily available. International anarchy as a basic assumption

---

[13] His career between the military and the private sector meant that he did not have a university degree, for example. However, this was not entirely unusual in those wartime years. His State Secretary, *Ernst von Weizsäcker*, had also joined the Foreign Office in 1920 after leaving military service without having taken any exams or studied at university. See http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/biografien/WeizsaeckerErnst.

[14] The Social Democratic Party entered the 1949 federal election campaign with an election poster showing the German eastern border of 1914, i.e., including Danzig, Memel, West Prussia, and Posen. See the presentation at the Berlin "Haus der Geschichte" (House of History): http://www.hdg.de/lemo/objekte/pict/JahreDesAufbausInOstUndWest_plakatSPDVorwaerts/index.html.

The realistic school of diplomacy was evident everywhere. For example, the possibility of France being encircled by Germany and Spain had once played a major role in France's veto against a Hohenzollern on the Spanish throne and contributed to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870/71. Nevertheless, the prospect of a Spanish-German coalition war against France remained more of a theoretical possibility, although it had been discussed again since 1936 due to the Spanish Civil War. One of Ribbentrop's tasks on the international stage was to dispel such fears in a "non-intervention committee" of European states set up specifically for this purpose in London. Historically speaking, this fear of a Spanish-German coalition could at best be based on the situation in the early modern period, when Spain's Charles V and France's King Francis I competed for the German imperial crown and Charles V, who was ultimately successful, as Spanish king and Roman-German emperor, actually put encircled France in distress. France countered at the time by breaking with the propagated Christian solidarity and bringing Muslim Ottoman Turkey into play behind the back of the early modern German Empire. This may seem far-fetched as a model, but Edouard Herriot recalled this option of traditional power politics beyond all ideological constraints in 1932 before Parliament with a commitment to traditional power politics:

> "Remember how Francis I allied himself with Turkey not only in the face of, but actually against, the whole of Christendom, because the interests of France demanded this and nothing else."(15)

This was indeed far in the past, but it was nevertheless presented here in order to initiate a discussion about a Soviet-French rapprochement. From the perspective of 1932, however, a more realistic scenario might have been the encirclement of the USSR by a Japanese-English constellation, possibly supported by Poland and Germany, as had been evident shortly after the revolution between 1918 and 1920. Poland itself also had reason to fear encirclement by Germany and the USSR, but relied on the irreconcilable differences between the two states. However, what Ribbentrop actually found to be a current threat when he began to deal with foreign policy was the encirclement of Germany by Great Britain, France, and Poland and the open threat of a Polish invasion of Germany as soon as the Western powers would support it politically.[16] It was to become a hallmark of JvR's foreign policy to want to eliminate the danger of German encirclement by concluding various bilateral and ultimately multilateral alliances. He himself described this in his memoirs as a situation

---

[15] Quoted from *Gathorne-Hardy*, Politics, p. 433.

[16] *Robert Vansittart*, then Under-Secretary of State and head of the Foreign Office, noted in retrospect that Poland's dictator *Pilsudski* had proposed armed action against Germany "twice a year" at that time. See *Vansittart*, Procession, p. 412.

between "London and Moscow." This concerned the period when Ribbentrop was foreign minister, but it could also be said that there had previously been a similar situation between "Paris and Warsaw," which in 1932/33 posed a very real threat of military attack on Germany. From Warsaw, the Polish government repeatedly inquired whether the French government would approve or support Polish military action against Germany. Had Paris and/or London given their consent, such an attack would have taken place, as the future Polish Foreign Minister Beck demanded in letters to Head of State Pilsudski in late 1932. The situation for a war was now more favorable than ever, a "war to liberate Polish territories from the German yoke." The army was ready.

Clearly, such an open game of possible state constellations had led to permanent uncertainty and tensions and was bound to continue doing so. The "age of warring states," as Oswald Spengler had called a comparable era in Chinese history, found its counterpart in Europe. A way out of this situation could be offered by closer cooperation between at least the larger European states, for example a kind of four-member directorate consisting of England, France, Italy, and Germany, ideally with the inclusion of second-tier states such as Spain or Poland. This did not necessarily have to lead to the development of a common European idea, but it did require an awareness of the problem on all sides and the intention to solve it. An alternative was the hegemony of individual powers in Europe, which around 1930 only Germany could still achieve, at least in theory, or the exercise of European hegemony by the Soviet Union or the United States. Hegemony based on international law, as claimed by the League of Nations founded in 1919, had not existed in practice. The legal principles formulated in the Covenant of the League of Nations had often been violated by the League members themselves, in Europe and elsewhere. The League of Nations offered its members no effective protection against attacks and occupation.

Nevertheless, at least in theory, there were also completely different alternatives for German policy. For Ribbentrop, for Hitler, but also for the entire elite of the Foreign Office and the Weimar parties, the axiom applied that Germany would only be secure if it had allies and would only be capable of forming alliances if it had a certain level of armament. However, there were also completely different perspectives on the situation. All the demonstratively displayed armaments had not been able to protect the Wilhelmine Empire from foreign policy isolation; perhaps they had even brought at least one additional adversary onto the scene in the form of Great Britain.

---

[17] Report by the Federal Police Directorate in Vienna dated November 4, 1932, to Austrian Chancellor *Dollfuss* regarding a letter from *Beck* to *Pilsudski* dated October 27, 1932, including a partial transcript of the letter, copy in the author's possession, here p. 1. For the background and further content of the letters, see *Scheil,* Gegner, chap. V, F.

One could therefore have said, and some did say,[18]that it was precisely the obvious military harmlessness of the Weimar Republic that opened up entirely new possibilities for foreign policy. Without the costs of an army and completely safe from accusations of threatening others, there was little scope for Germany's neighbors to justify aggression against it. Theoretically, the Weimar Republic could have capitalized on that (or a similar) strategy, as it did after 1945, enabling the gradual rise of the Federal Republic as a major power. Found guilty, somewhat remorseful, and in any case averse to the anachronistic imperialist power games of its neighbors in the East and West, the Weimar Republic had already built up considerable political capital. Why should it not be possible to demonstratively renounce rearmament and its immense costs, use the savings to improve infrastructure, and allow the German Republic to once again become the economic center of Europe and, at the same time, the center of a new form of world politics? In this way, a morally superior, economically attractive, and ultimately active German foreign policy could be established. It was not only weapons that could create allies; money could do so too.

However, there were many reasons why such a policy was unlikely to succeed in the 1920s or 1930s. Not only firearms, but also economic power can arouse fear, hostility, and envy. A policy of economic harmlessness ultimately requires active hegemony, in which the fantasies of conquest and occupation of other states are either curbed or fulfilled and in which one's own economic performance can be developed. Neither was the case, as Bülow, then State Secretary in the Foreign Office, noted in 1934. European policy did not allow German economic power to develop and knew how to take advantage of this:

> "Given our isolation and current economic and currency weakness, our opponents do not need to expose themselves to the risk, odium, and dangers of military coercive measures. Without mobilizing a single man or firing a single shot, they can plunge us into the worst possible predicament by imposing an open or covert financial and economic blockade against us."([19])

After its defeat in 1919, Germany was impoverished and dependent on foreign loans, which had been reclaimed since 1929. This isolation of Germany had made it possible for the National Socialists to come to power in the first place, but in economic terms it had actually increased thereafter. However, by the summer of 1934, when von Bülow wrote his letter, the most critical point could already be considered overcome, which in the winter of 1933/34

---

[18] See, for example, *Willy Hellpach*: Politische Prognose für Deutschland (Political Forecast for Germany), Berlin 1928, passim.

[19] Quoted from BA-KO N 1310/47 Neurath estate, letter from State Secretary *Bülow* to *Neurath*, August 16, 1934, p. 9.

almost caused the collapse of the German economy. The Weimar Republic had failed to establish itself as an economic superpower. It was hardly able to influence political developments that threatened the very existence of the German state, such as the ongoing secession of Austria and the discrimination against Germans and creeping de-Germanization in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Therefore, the conclusion in the context of the era of warring states was obvious. A comprehensive revision that could bring security and prosperity had to begin with political and military equality. However, this would predictably lead to tensions and could result in an era of uncertainty. It was a question of Germany's political capability, but also of the political capability of other states, whether this uncertainty could then be overcome again or whether the tendency would prevail in various states to see the general uncertainty as an opportunity for their own development, as was then to be the case in a whole series of states in 1938/39. Unfortunately, contemporary historical research on Germany often approached the question of National Socialism's capacity for peace in a very one-sided manner. At least Walther Hofer, in 1964, raised his answer to the question of what would have happened "if one had simply stood by and watched Hitler's continued actions" to a level of differentiation, at least in a suggestive manner:

> "At best, it would have been a peace on German, National Socialist terms, and thus a peace that for many people *and* states would have been a cemetery peace. However, the living forces of Europe in 1939 could not accept such a peace, just as little as they desire peace at any price today in the face of the similar Bolshevik threat and blackmail."[20]

These sentences formulate a rather direct rejection of Hofer's own polemical thesis that Hitler wanted war at any price in 1939. In that case, the question of whether the "living forces of Europe" could theoretically accept Hitler's peace would not even arise. The fact that, according to Hofer, Hitler's peace was not accepted and that people no longer "stood idly by" is also an apt description of which party took action in 1938/39. With regard to Hofer's comparison with "Bolshevism," the further question arises as to whether a "graveyard peace" in 1939 could not just as well have led to a Cold War, to the benefit of the people of Europe, as was the case shortly after 1945. National Socialism, like Bolshevik-style communism, Polish interwar nationalism, or outgoing Western imperialism, was not an immutable institution. This statement is not speculation, but rather a reminder of the nature of the historical process. The project to which JvR had committed himself by his allegiance to National Socialism was for him primarily a patriotic one.

---

[20] Quoted from *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 460.

nationalist, which was not without precedent in history. Hitler embodied an eccentric phenomenon, as Ribbentrop believed other nations had also experienced.

2. The analogy of the national awakening

> "I was very tempted to join that movement in some form after 1933. But that had nothing to do with the opinions of those people, only with that elementary reaction to what Wilhelm Kütemeyer called the pseudo-outpouring of the Holy Spirit in 1933."
>
> Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker[21]

After the collapse, or rather the dismantling, of Austria-Hungary as a result of the peace treaties signed in Paris, the German question after the First World War took on a completely different dimension than before. Until then, Austria-Hungary could be regarded as a state whose existence, whether desired or not, could be used for pan-Germanist objectives. But it had been a weak state whose foreign policy differences with the German Empire were considerable and which, towards the end of the war, had even attempted to conclude a separate peace with the Allies at Germany's expense. It could therefore by no means be taken for granted that Austria's existence would pave the way for pan-German goals. After 1919, however, a completely different problem was on the international agenda. The German Austrians in the proclaimed republic saw their own political future preferably as part of a united Germany. This had been openly declared, confirmed in trial votes with more than ninety percent approval, was therefore generally known, and led to the explicit – and in 1945 repeated – prohibition of such a union, known as Greater Germany, by the Allies.[22]

Some time ago, Günther Wollstein described a democratic Greater Germany as a "model of order with no chance," with no chance for internal as well as external political reasons. Germany's neighboring states viewed such a pan-German unification with mistrust and, not without reason, as a threat to their own political capabilities.

---

[21] Quoted in *Stern*, Deutschland, p. 520.

[22] Austria's first post-war chancellor, *Karl Renner*, noted this with regret in a speech at the Vienna Chancellery on April 30, 1945: "The three world powers have agreed to restore Austria's independence, and all other states in the world, with a few exceptions, have joined these world powers, leaving us with no choice but to abandon the idea of annexation ourselves." Quoted in *Rathkolb*, Republik, p. 21.

[23] Cf. *Wollstein*: Das Großdeutsche Reich als Demokratie – Ordnungsmodell ohne Chance, in: *Dülffer*, Deutschland, pp. 229–249.

There had never been a centrally governed German industrial state within its traditional borders, which had existed from the late Middle Ages until 1866. There was a prospect that its economic potential and demographic superiority would call into question the independence of countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, regardless of its internal constitution. In this respect there were sworn opponents of such a possibility of unification.

British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once described German unification efforts as "dreamy and dangerous nonsense."(25) This is still often quoted today, with the emphasis on the terms "dreamy" and "nonsense" rather than "dangerous." From the perspective of English politics, such a German state was bound to become dangerous, but especially in Disraeli's time, when the industrial and demographic explosion in Germany was still ahead, it was probably not so dangerous that its existence had to be completely rejected. Even after 1919, there were influential figures in British politics who considered a Greater or Unified Germany without a fleet or colonies, but with influence in its eastern sphere of influence, to be an acceptable project. Among those who continued to express this view clearly and on prominent occasions even after 1939 was, for example, former Prime Minister David Lloyd George.[26] We will see later that this was essentially the project that JvR pursued as foreign minister on the instructions and with the approval of Hitler, the head of state and party leader, in 1938 and 1939. However, this was a novelty in the European world of states, and the search for historical analogies could prove explosive.

Ribbentrop defended National Socialism to his long-standing British interlocutor and contact Ernest Tennant using such historical analogies. At least, that is how Tennant remembered the content of their first conversation. He himself had emphasized the difficulties Hitler would create for himself by alienating Catholics and

---

[24] *Winston Churchill's* estate contains a leaflet, the date of which cannot be precisely determined, that agitates on the basis of this fear with a German population explosion and depicts "Germany in 1950" as a colossus with 250 million inhabitants that has visually and demographically marginalized all of its European neighbors. See CHAR 2/340 B.

[25] Cf. *Holborn*, History, 3, p. 66.

[26] In the spring of 1940, *Lloyd George* told US Deputy Secretary of State *Sumner Welles* that the current war was "the most foolish war ever waged, into which Great Britain had been plunged because of the mistakes of its governments. ... There was no reason, either from the point of view of France or England, why the Germans should not be united in one state, or why they should not have exclusive economic influence in Central and parts of Southeastern Europe." Conversation recorded by *Welles* during his stay in London in the spring of 1940, in: FRUS, I, p. 86.

(27) *Tennant* was later among the witnesses requested by *Ribbentrop's* defense at the Nuremberg trial and rejected as allegedly irrelevant. See *Tennant*, Account,
p. 244, and IMT, session of February 25, 1946.

Ribbentrop returned the accusation to England, which, like all large European countries, had itself had its differences with the two aforementioned countries at times:

> In this context, Ribbentrop argued that Germany was hundreds of years behind Great Britain, particularly with regard to Jews and Catholics. Great Britain, he said, had begun to develop into a great nation under Queen Elizabeth I after her father, Henry VIII, had broken the power of the Vatican and closed the monasteries. Furthermore, there had been no Jews in England during this period of English ascendancy. Edward I had expelled them all, and it was not until Cromwell that the first ones returned. ... Germany, according to Ribbentrop, was only trying to achieve a degree of freedom from external influences that Great Britain had already achieved three hundred and fifty years earlier."([28])

Tennant dates this conversation and several others with Ribbentrop to the period before Hitler became Reich Chancellor. Ribbentrop's correct reference to Cromwell, who had indeed been the first to allow Jews to reside in England again after centuries of interruption, may have seemed somewhat memorable to him insofar as Fritz Thyssen had told Tennant after Hitler's speech to the Düsseldorf Industrial Club that Hitler intended to become Germany's Cromwell. Here, the analogy clearly reached its limits.

Tennant was present at Hitler's famous speech to the Industry Club,[29] where six hundred predominantly skeptical representatives of German industry, after listening to Hitler's two-and-a-half-hour speech[(30)] were inclined to see him as a political hope, or at least not a political impossibility. Hitler clearly affirmed the right to private property and called for a general national renewal. He completely avoided the topic of anti-Semitism.([31]) At that time, Tennant was apparently exploring the political landscape in Germany in the days before the National Socialists seized power on behalf of the British Foreign Office.([32]) The National-

---

[28] Quoted from *Tennant*, Account, p. 152. In 1891, *Lucien Wolf*, a historian and diplomat of Jewish descent, pointed out that *Cromwell* could count on financial and organizational support from Jewish sources for his undertaking. The corresponding essay on
"Cromwell's Jewish Intelligencers" was republished by the Jewish Historical Society of England in 1934 in the collection "Essays in Jewish History."

[29] *Tennant* states that he received the invitation via *Eugen Lehnkering*, who, according to his information, was a member of the NSDAP with the number 21 and had been a contact of his since the turn of the year 1930/31. See *Tennant,* Account, p. 136 ff. Later, the shipowner *Lehnkering* served as chairman of *Ribbentrop's* "German-English Society," which was founded in December 1935.

[30] The original plan was for a one-hour speech, but *Hitler* arbitrarily extended it.

[31] See *Turner*, Industrie-Club, p. 9 ff.

[32] Cf. *Tennant's* lengthy report to the Foreign Office, which he published in his memoirs. Cf. *Tennant*, Account, p. 138 ff.

Based on Hitler's speech in Düsseldorf and other information, he attributed the un-British, rather suspicious characteristics of zeal, youth, and international inexperience to the Socialists. Their politics were essentially anti-communist, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic, and also directed against the status quo of the Treaty of Versailles. All in all, Tennant did not seem to find this unacceptable for English politics, mainly because of its anti-communist thrust, especially if the National Socialists were to change their perspective on some issues, in particular their loudly proclaimed hostility towards Jews.

In fact, state-organized anti-Semitism with an eliminatory character had previously existed in countries such as England, France, and Spain. When Ribbentrop mentioned this to Tennant and described it as a characteristic of a period of British ascendancy, it highlighted the dangers of drawing historical analogies. On the one hand, history is full of things that were politically "normal" at certain times but are morally extremely questionable. Nazi anti-Semitism of a racist nature also represented a significant affront to the internationally accepted legal concepts of its time and to Christian values, not only of a Catholic nature. Ribbentrop was aware of this and occasionally complained about it, as well as about the negative political consequences. However, he could not bring himself to publicly distance himself and thus give up his efforts to participate in National Socialist politics. The fascination of national awakening in historical dimensions was too great for him.

A completely different question was that of the dynamics of such a national awakening at other levels. Ribbentrop's British interlocutors repeatedly expressed their view that they saw German ideas as the beginning of an uncontrollable development. London had never believed that Wilhelmine Germany, or its European competitors – or "tyrants," as they were often called – from Spain and France, from Charles V to Napoleon, could be a saturated nation with clearly defined interests. In any case, this was also the argument put forward by sympathetic individuals, such as Ribbentrop in his main report to Hitler as ambassador in London at the end of 1937:

> "Lord Londonderry seems to believe this too. He told me recently that once a powerful nation has set itself in motion and taken possession of a position or a country—e.g., Austria, etc.—that nation must continue to march forward in its momentum against Europe, against the world ("there is no end to the moving of a nation, once it has started moving")."[34]

Although this view was obviously incorrect and could be refuted by countless historical examples, it was always used against Germany.

---

[33] An overview can be found in: *Figl*, Religionswissenschaft, p. 396.

[34] *Ribbentrop's* main report, cited here from PA AA R 28895a, p. 15.

This was brought up again, which, in addition to previous historical experiences, was undoubtedly related to the comprehensive political letters of termination that National Socialism had sent to many places. Lord Londonderry([35]), mentioned by Ribbentrop, had also increasingly become one of the most active German-British contacts after losing his cabinet post as British Minister of Aviation in the spring of 1935. At the same time, however, he was one of those who regarded the British Empire as the natural center of the world and, due to personal wealth and generations of habit, considered themselves part of the leadership of this center. If Germany were to question these self-evident truths, war was the appropriate remedy, especially for Londonderry, but not an end in itself. Later, he would speak bitterly about Baldwin, Chamberlain, and especially Churchill. He had wanted to achieve through statesmanship what the latter had wanted to achieve through war.([37]) In fact, the dispute over Austria would then significantly increase the momentum of developments toward armed conflict between Great Britain and the German Empire.

3. Economic issues

> "Enormous shifts in power politics bring about economic upheavals which, on the one hand, cause opportunities to dry up, but on the other hand open up opportunities that revitalize the economy in unexpected ways. This is the eternal game between politics and economics. But politics always has primacy."
>
> Joachim von Ribbentrop[38]

One of the aspects of National Socialist policy that has long been neglected by research is economic policy, a core area of politics in general. Interpretations of the Nazi regime as the charismatic rule of a single individual, a form of tyranny to be interpreted psychoanalytically, or merely petty bourgeois

---

[35] *Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart*, 7th Marquess of Londonderry (1878–1949).

[36] As Minister of Aviation until 1935, *Londonderry* had laid the foundation for the British Air Force, which from 1940 onwards was able to repel German attacks and, as planned, increasingly bomb Germany. However, it was precisely his relationship with the deployment of British bombers, which he had designed to crush resistance to British imperial rule in the Middle East and India, and for which the predecessor models had been used extensively in the 1920s and early 1930s, that caused *Londonderry* to stumble as minister. On May 22, 1935, he candidly declared before Parliament that "it was only thanks to the presence of the Air Force that we controlled these areas without the old and heavy losses of blood and money." The political establishment did not forgive him for this confrontation with the brutal reality of British imperialism. See *Kershaw,* Friends, p. 139 ff.

[37] Cf. *Kershaw*, Freunde, p. 396.

[38] Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 5.

Before 1989, the proletarian desire for power and conquest regularly prevented Western researchers from viewing National Socialism as *socialism*. In a sense, more recent interpretations of National Socialism as a "dictatorship of convenience" also follow this tradition,[39] since economic activity is ultimately understood as a psychologically based form of exercising power by creating a certain mood. Now, this behavior is common in every form of government in order to overcome short-term problems. In this respect, this statement is as accurate as it is banal. On the other hand, there was the real socialist view at the time that National Socialism, as a form of fascism, was nothing more than the disguised rule of capitalism in its purest form. What both views had in common was that they ignored an essential part of the picture. The National Socialist government had come to power not least as a result of an extended global economic crisis. It developed comprehensive theories on how to overcome this crisis in the long term, and these theories amounted to anti-capitalist, currency-free world trade. The Nazi leadership's basic assumption was that the First World War had been caused by the economic exploitation of the world in the manner that had prevailed until then and by competition for world trade markets. At the same time, Germany could be cut off at any time by blocking the transport routes for raw materials and food supplies. This was one of the central experiences of the German war generation between 1914 and 1919. In Germany, which had previously been well-fed and rich, the blockade had claimed several hundred thousand lives, mainly elderly people and children.[40] A model of regional economic activity in Central and Southeastern Europe was now intended to provide an answer to both problems, the threat of war and commercial competition as well as the danger of blockade.

As a wholesaler of alcoholic beverages, Joachim von Ribbentrop had acquired his fortune in a manner that did not seem to correspond to such anti-capitalist aspects. Although the origin of his wealth provided a frequent target for all kinds of mocking remarks during his terms in office, it also apparently offered him the opportunity to establish informal contacts that would prove politically viable and fruitful, such as with Lord Allen of Hurtwood.[41] At the same time as ambassador and foreign policy advisor to the dictator, he also had to take into account the economic policy and economic practices of the Nazi state. On March 1

---

[39] See *Aly*, Volksstaat, 49 ff.

[40] The number of Germans who died of starvation is disputed. Contemporaries estimated eight hundred thousand people, while later calculations put the "excess mortality" at three hundred thousand. See *Weizsäcker,* Papers, I, p. 338, *Jagow,* Data, p. 170, and *Mirow,* History, p. 795.

[41] *Clifford Allen*, 1st Baron Allen of Hurtwood (1889–1939), British politician and prominent pacifist who was imprisoned for several years as a conscientious objector during the First World War.

In 1937, during his time as ambassador in London, he gave a programmatic speech in Leipzig before the Economic Commission of the NSDAP entitled "Four-Year Plan and World Trade," which also attracted a great deal of attention in London. Ribbentrop's dual role as ambassador and chief advisor to the head of state forced him to make such appearances, which went beyond the role of ambassador and could be interpreted as disrespectful in London, which is indeed what happened.[43] However, thespeech itself followed very closely the lines Ribbentrop had taken in a discussion with his future English counterpart Halifax two weeks earlier. In part, it is a verbatim reproduction of his statements at that time, so that at least no one in London could have been surprised. [44]

He drew a demonstratively positive conclusion from the past four years, which had shown that "there is no unsolvable economic problem for a united Germany in the long term."[45] In particular, the abandonment of the gold standard since 1933 had been "the egg of Columbus for Germany."[46] However, what sounded so good and should have been continued was now in danger due to the "short-sightedness of individual countries" and the "spread of Bolshevism." Hitler had therefore sought new paths and launched the Four-Year Plan last year: "This plan has thus been virtually forced upon Germany by foreign countries."[47]This clearly sounded like a certain dissatisfaction with the new plans, although the statement itself was correct in that the trade boycott by the US and subsequently also by other Western countries had hit the German economy hard. The reference to the "spread of Bolshevism" was also well-founded within the regime, as it was precisely this threat and the prospect of a major Soviet attack on Europe that was in fact the main motive for the new economic plan, as Hitler stated in a corresponding "Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan."[48] Economic concerns

---

[42] Among other things, there was a statement *by Anthony Eden* to the House of Commons on March 2, 1937, and on March 8, 1937, a House of Commons debate with a question from several MPs to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Viscount Granborne,* on the subject of whether foreign ambassadors should not discuss such issues with the government instead of "making them the subject of political speeches and propaganda." See PA AA, London 1594.

[43]*Sigismund FitzRandolph*, the liaison officer of the Propaganda Ministry at the London Embassy, is said to have had a friendly debate with an Englishman after and because of this speech, who characterized *Ribbentrop's* appearance and German diplomacy in general as "too open, too abrupt, and always too temperamental," as well as "too educated." After all, these traits were disadvantageous and, strictly speaking, actually in the "British interest." See *FitzRandolph,* London, p. 90 ff.

[44] Cf. ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 201, p. 436 ff.

[45] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 9.

[46] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 10.

[47] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 11. He argued along the same lines two weeks earlier in a conversation with *Halifax*. Cf. ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 201, p. 439.

[48]The key passages in the memorandum read as follows: "Through its victory, Marxism has gained one of the largest empires in the world as a base for its further operations.

should therefore be postponed in favor of further rearmament, as Germany's very existence was at stake.

Ribbentrop now attempted to strike a balance before the NSDAP's Economic Commission between acknowledging the successes of Germany's autarky policy and asserting that this was not evidence of "a German economic policy hostile to world trade," but quite the opposite.[49] In fact, autarky would create the prosperity that would enable Germany to return to the world market as a consumer. The speaker added that the Treaty of Versailles, which had deprived Germany of all its foreign assets, could be peacefully overcome in this way. But, Ribbentrop continued, this would also require the return of the German colonies for economic and political reasons. He immediately rejected any military use of such territories, because "from a military point of view, every colony is in itself a lost position for Germany from the outset."([50])Economically, however, according to the somewhat daring thesis, the Four-Year Plan was in fact the preparation for a new takeover of the German colonies currently provisionally assigned as "mandates" by the League of Nations to various states.

Ribbentrop constantly endeavored to keep this colonial demand in the political discourse. Although there was little prospect of success in this matter, it was taken for granted that such an established demand, which was in principle favored by the legal situation in Versailles, could not be waived without compensation. This attitude had been adopted by National Socialist foreign policy from the Weimar period. In 1919, the German colonies had been converted into "mandates" and, as subjects of international law, were therefore ultimately legally subject to the League of Nations, not to the administering states. In this respect, the signatory powers such as Great Britain and France could, at least in theory, arrange for the return of the mandates to Germany through the League of Nations without having to interfere in the territorial status of foreign countries. Hitler pursued a similar line to Ribbentrop with regard to this current debate, regularly making this colonial demand but at the same time describing it as non-urgent. If this point were to be emphasized too much,

---

created ... A democratic world torn apart by ideological conflicts is confronted by a united, authoritarian, ideologically based will to attack.

The military means of this will to attack are increasing rapidly from year to year. Compare the Red Army that has actually been created today with the assumptions made by the military 10 or 15 years ago in order to gauge the dangerous extent of this development. But consider the results of further development in 10, 15, or 20 years to get an idea of the conditions that will then prevail. ...

In view of the necessity of averting this danger, all other considerations must be relegated to the background as completely irrelevant!" Quoted in VfZ 1955, pp. 204/205. Emphasis in the original.

[49] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 12.

[50] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 16 f.

From Ribbentrop's point of view, there was then the danger that England might suddenly give in on this point and in return demand the renunciation of things such as the annexation of Austria and, in general, the recognition of the status quo in Central Europe. [51]Cleverly worded, this offer would be difficult to reject and would significantly damage the Nazi government's main interest, which was the unity of Germany as a whole. However, there was no need to fear this too much. The private secretary to the British Foreign Minister, Oliver Harvey, aptly summarized the prospects for colonial negotiations in May 1937, a few weeks after Ribbentrop's speech:

> "What is the situation? We will not give up the only valuable German colony we have; at most, we will give up a few strips of territory. France is not prepared to give up its only good German colony; its position ... is just as justified as ours in the case of Tanganyika"(52)

In fact, the remaining German colonies were worthless not only militarily but also economically, as has since been calculated and as contemporaries could already have known. If an area towards the end of the
If any territory in the 19th century had not yet been taken over by the traditional colonial powers of England, France, Spain, Portugal, and Holland, there were good reasons for this. These areas did not represent significant settlement areas, sources of raw materials, or sales markets, and the costs of developing them far exceeded their value. Colonial possessions were a source of prestige for Europeans and were also demanded as a symbol of being taken seriously as a "great power" by the Polish government and Polish interest groups during the interwar period, for example. With the intention of acquiring colonial possessions as a victorious power, Warsaw established contacts with London in the spring of 1939. It was partly for this reason that Poland went to war against Germany in September 1939, without anyone in the Polish Foreign Ministry being entirely clear how and where this could lead to colonial acquisition.

However, what had been a lucrative business during long periods of modern history was now, insofar as it still existed, in established hands. The only exception was the universally coveted and equally

---

[51] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, ambassador's report.

[52] Quoted in *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 408, May 8, 1937.

[53] Foreign Minister *Beck's* chief of staff, *Michal Lubienski,* confirmed this ironically: "Our colonial aspirations were supposed to testify to our status as a great power. On the international stage, our colonial policy was viewed with irony. But that was not the point. To characterize our own mood, I would like to recount the following anecdote: On September 4, 1939, department head *Zarychta* came to our office at the Foreign Ministry and asked me not to forget Poland's colonial claims when drafting the war aims. I asked him from whom we should demand our colonies, from the Allies, from England and France, or from neutral Italy." See *Lubienski,* Poland, p. 80.

if only at the end of the 19th century acquired Belgian Central Africa, the Congo. It was precisely this area that the Chamberlain government ultimately wanted to offer to the German government for joint exploitation in 1938 and 1939, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain attempted to overcome pressure from the war party in his own country.

At the same time, colonialism also provided a gateway for the adversary that Ribbentrop went on to discuss. Since the 1920s, the Communist International had been mobilizing the masses in the colonial territories against bourgeois-capitalist-white rule. This was successful, especially in Asia. There was no intellectual analysis to justify why England, for example, should rule over India; it was simply a matter of habit. The smug racism displayed by Winston Churchill toward the Indians, whom he considered worthy of extinction, was already on the decline among Western elites. In Europe, this strategy took the form of
"foreign elements dependent on dark forces."
According to Ribbentrop, the "agitation" was formally directed only against Germany. However, it was a united front that had been established from Moscow:

> "True to Lenin's guiding principles of using all existing bourgeois institutions, ideologies, and means for the goals of the Comintern, explicit reference was made to the inclusion of the otherwise hated Second International and the democratic parties in this united front. Anyone who still refuses to see that Bolshevism wants to seize power in all remaining constitutional states solely and exclusively by undermining the internal social order of these states cannot be helped."([55])

The speaker emphasized that the National Socialist Four-Year Plan would also counter this communist strategy. He concluded by repeating his argument that the Four-Year Plan would lead to prosperity, prosperity to world trade, and world trade to peace. This speech in Leipzig became very well known in England for several reasons. Firstly, it was unusual for an ambassador from another country accredited in London to give programmatic speeches in his home country. This was, of course, due to Ribbentrop's role as chief foreign policy advisor to the German dictator and was therefore not surprising. On the other hand, the notorious opponents of a German-English treaty partnership once again succeeded in staging a media coup. Ribbentrop's statement that German foreign policy must be based on its own "strength" was widely reported in the English press.

---

[54]"Leninism has exposed this glaring disparity, torn down the dividing wall between whites and people of color, between Europeans, between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' slaves of imperialism, and in this way linked the national question with the question of the colonies." Quoted from *Stalin,* Works VI, p. 122 f.

[55] Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Welthandel, p. 21.

incorrectly translated. According to this, he had said that it must be based on "violence." (56) The combination of the unusual location and the incorrect translation caused one of those minor scandals that ultimately made it impossible for Ribbentrop to implement his plans in London.

4. Ribbentrop , and early National Socialism

> "It is completely irrelevant if someone says: I reject the entire National Socialist system. It doesn't matter, you may reject it, but now it is what decides Germany's fate."
>
> Hermann Göring[57]

Based on what is known about Ribbentrop's ideas, arguments, and actions, it is possible to determine, at least vaguely, his relationship to National Socialist ideology. In his memoirs, he repeatedly attributes a purely functional significance to National Socialism, which he claims was a result of the political situation at the time. According to this, in the winter of 1930/31 he came to the conclusion that a communist revolution had become a likely scenario in view of economic developments. He himself had been close to the liberal German People's Party and had watched the decline of the bourgeois parties with "horror."[58] That is why he had campaigned abroad to give the incumbent Reich Chancellor Brüning a chance, otherwise either Hitler or communism would succeed him. From today's perspective, this prospect of a communist coup seems unrealistic. The Communist Party in Germany never had the support and influence to take over the government on its own. The course of the revolutionary years between 1919 and 1923 had clearly shown that, on the contrary, anti-communism among civil servants, in the economy and the military, but also within the political spectrum, even extending into social democracy, had a spontaneous potential for mobilization that made communist attempts at uprising futile, despite their considerable organizational strength and support from the Soviet Union. This may also have been the reason why Moscow came up with a completely different plan and, rather than a communist revolution in Germany, opted to shake up German society with a nationalist dictatorship and a subsequent war. This war was to break out between German nationalism and its rivals in France, England, Italy, and Poland, and was a long-term concept, as communist veterans confirmed:

---

[56] Cf. *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 91.

[57] *Göring* in a speech to entrepreneurs in the aviation industry on July 8, 1938. Quoted in IMT, XXXVIII, p. 384.

[58] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 34.

> "It was Lenin who, when he saw that the Russian Revolution was not developing as he wanted, tried to find new ways out by mobilizing nationalist forces in the East (in the 'colonies'), but above all in Germany. ... Radek told me that the German workers 'must put up with Hitler for two years'. He meant to give Hitler time to prepare for his war in the West."([59])

In fact, another major European war could be very useful to the Soviet Union's goals. This became one of Ribbentrop's constant themes as a foreign policy maker, and this awareness undoubtedly contributed to Hitler's earlier ambitions for German expansion towards
"East" had been significantly restricted during his chancellorship, which we will discuss in detail later. Hitler, like Ribbentrop and everyone else of his generation, had experienced firsthand in October 1917 in Tsarist Russia and then in November 1918 in Germany itself how a seemingly stable political system could become completely defenseless within a short period of time. This had left them, as it had others, with the impression that communism could become a threat if the reputation of the Weimar parties continued to decline, as it had been temporarily in the face of the collapse of the Wilhelmine system of rule in 1918/19. The constant warnings and fears of a communist revolutionary attempt accurately reflected Ribbentrop's thinking. They also described an actual communist strategy. However, circumstances developed differently than this strategy had anticipated. The probability of a European war over the question of German national unity was present, but there was no automatic mechanism for it. The immediate threat of war in 1939 even prompted Ribbentrop to attempt to manipulate the Soviet Union and use it to support the very states that Stalin actually wanted to plunge into war.

Such differing experiences of domestic political stability, or, one might say, security from revolution, were to have a massive influence on foreign policy discussions in the 1930s, because Ribbentrop's interlocutors in the London establishment, which he was courting, did not share his fears. They did not take his constant warnings about the communist-Soviet threat seriously, but rather considered them to be an instrumentalized specter, the soon-to-be proverbial "Bolshevik bogey," behind which very different German political intentions were attempting to hide. Despite the great challenges during the First World War, there had been no revolution in Great Britain, and there seemed to be no sign of one on the horizon. Instead, people looked to Germany, whose ideological constitution gave rise to speculation. After all, Hitler showed himself to be

---

[59]Statement by *Karl August Wittfogel,* a communist official at the time. Quoted in *Gref-Frath*, Zerstörung, p. 318 f. For more details on this topic, see: *Scheil*, Gegner, p. 127 ff., chapter: Wie man eine Mine unter Europa sprengt.

Despite his demonstrative anti-communism, he was himself so strongly oriented toward state socialism that he once characterized the state he ruled as the "German People's Republic" in a public speech on the occasion of the new construction of the Reich Chancellery:

> "I have confidence and faith in the future of the German People's Republic, and I want it to be a worthy representative of German culture."(60)

This German People's Republic, also referred to as the "People's Empire" in the same speech, Ribbentrop ultimately attempted, under his premise that "we must opt," as foreign minister, to establish "secular" friendly relations with Great Britain and the Soviet Union, i.e., relations of a non-ideological nature. Later, in 1940/41, he did not believe in an imminent Soviet attack; at that time, he also assumed that the Stalinist system of government was capable of secular relations. Consequently, his assessment of communism also underwent various changes, which were favored by the apparent intention of the Stalinist leadership to no longer pursue world revolutionary goals.

In any case, Ribbentrop's statement in his memoirs that, in his view, a Hitler government in 1932/33 was the second-best option at the time is noteworthy.[61] According to his own statement, Ribbentrop's concerns about the domestic political situation of the Weimar Republic led him to conclude that the National Socialists should be included in the government, but not with the aim of a National Socialist single-party government, but rather to "help form a national coalition between the bourgeois parties and the National Socialists."(62)On this occasion, he also joined the NSDAP after a first personal meeting with Hitler in August 1932. These personal contacts with the head of government were to lay the foundation for the beginning of Ribbentrop's foreign policy career about six months later, shortly after Hitler took office, and remain so permanently. They quickly and permanently changed the personal relationship between the two men. In Ribbentrop's eyes—as in those of so many others, albeit with varying degrees of appreciation—Hitler, who personified the answer to a crisis situation, quickly became a figure in whom the meaning of German national history was concentrated. The first step in this direction was taken after Ribbentrop's Schil-

---

[60]From *Hitler's* speech at the topping-out ceremony for the New Reich Chancellery on August 2, 1938, in: Archiv Speer, Heidelberg, quoted here from *Schönberger*, Reichskanzlei, p. 179.

[61]It also contradicts some statements that *Ribbentrop* was always "loyal to Hitler," even in Nuremberg prison, as presented, for example, by the Allied prison psychiatrist Gilbert. Despite his own skepticism, *Ribbentrop* increasingly regarded *Hitler* as a special figure in German national history, analogous to *Oliver Cromwell* or *Napoleon I* for England and France, respectively. He believed he had to take this historical dimension into account, even after the end of the war, and developed the ambition to play a leading role in German politics during this person's era.

[62] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 35.

[63] According to *Roland Ray,* as early as May 1, 1932. Cf. *Ray*, Abetz, p. 123.

He placed emphasis on this during a detailed conversation at Ribbentrop's villa, which Hitler had announced he would attend a few weeks after January 30, 1933. One motive for Hitler to engage more intensively with Ribbentrop's accounts of his impressions from trips abroad at this particular time and then in the following months may be seen in a general search for the new connections he would need as chancellor. Ribbentrop had proved to be an important figure in the final phase of January 1933, as it was in his house that the political negotiations on the formation of a coalition had taken place. A particular turning point was the meeting on January 24, at which the "resolution on a national front" was passed, which ultimately became the lever with which Reich President Hindenburg's aversion to Hitler as chancellor at the head of a mere presidential cabinet was finally overcome: "Here and nowhere else was the Third Reich born. Papen was there, and Ribbentrop, and Göring, and Frick."(64)

This "here and nowhere else" was Ribbentrop's villa in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem. From this circumstance and the subsequent success of his accession to power, Hitler may have concluded that Ribbentrop had connections and views that could be valuable to him as a dictator, including in international relations. On May 21, 1941, Hitler recalled the conversations at Ribbentrop's house:

> "After the election victory in Lippe, the importance of which cannot be overestimated, had been won, the old man's entourage (i.e., President Hindenburg, author's note) had once again made contact with him. A meeting with Hindenburg's son and Mr. von Papen had been arranged at Ribbentrop's house. ..He had agreed to such meetings, which only distracted him from his work in the movement, because he attached great importance to the legitimate assumption of the chancellorship, i.e., an assumption that was, as it were, blessed by the old gentleman."(65)

---

64 Quoted from *Heinz Höhne*, Die Machtergreifung, Hamburg 1983, p. 252.

65 Quoted from *Picker*, Tischgespräche, p. 463, May 21, 1942, evening. According to him, the reason for the latter was tactical, as *Hitler* anticipated possible resistance from the Reichswehr, especially from the incumbent Chancellor *Schleicher* and his entourage: "*Schleicher's* closest associate and commander-in-chief of the army did not even deign to call him and inform him that 'the Reichswehr could not approve of his chancellorship under any circumstances'. However, if the gentlemen around *Schleicher* had imagined that such antics could shake his resolve, they were sorely mistaken." Quoted in *Picker*, Tischgespräche, p. 465, May 21, 1942, evening. This is remarkable in that, just a few days after his appointment as chancellor, *Hitler* is said to have spoken about fundamental foreign policy goals at a meeting of senior officers in *Hammerstein's* apartment. A transcript of *Hitler's* speech, probably sent to Moscow by *Hammerstein's* communist-oriented daughter *Helga von Hammerstein*, whose origin is unclear, speaks of the possible choice between participation in the world market or the conquest of living space, which the speaker is said to have described. According to the only surviving record that can be traced back to notes taken during the speech, made by *Hammerstein's* then adjutant General *Horst von Mellenthin, Hitler* stated that by "living space" he meant colonies. See *Wirsching,* source, p. 520 f.

Ribbentrop himself states that he emphasized his acquaintance with Gustav Stresemann to Hitler in their initial conversations, which seems to have reinforced the impression of competence, especially since Hitler is said to have subsequently praised Stresemann and his foreign policy.[66] This stood in stark contrast to the NSDAP's years of polemics against alleged appeasers of the Weimar period, among whom Stresemann was publicly counted. [67] It may have been intended as a sign of goodwill in times of establishing contacts. That evening, Hitler asked Ribbentrop to sound out and report on the mood in London and Paris during his upcoming trips abroad. Ribbentrop had apparently wanted to achieve this step, and so, a month later, the Third Reich was, in a sense, reinvented in Ribbentrop's villa, this time in terms of foreign policy.

Ribbentrop therefore entered into this alliance with Hitler without any necessity, motivated by a mixture of national sentiment and personal ambition, and perhaps also persuaded by Hitler, who that evening spoke about his entire foreign policy, including his intentions with regard to England, Italy, France, and the Soviet Union. Ribbentrop could have avoided this step or withdrawn a few months later at the latest, after the complete disempowerment and forced self-dissolution of the bourgeois Weimar parties, to which he had been close, according to his own statements. However, he does not even mention this domestic political development in his memoirs. This may be due to the circumstances and pressure under which he was forced to work in Nuremberg prison. However, it fits seamlessly with the behavior of large sections of the German population, the majority of whom did not vote for National Socialism, even when it was already in power, but who accepted the "national uprising" either with enthusiasm or passive anticipation. Ribbentrop interpreted it as a national and personal opportunity.

The execution of Ernst Röhm and the SA leadership on June 30, 1934, represented a spectacular step in the domestic political development outlined above, which led from the Weimar Republic to the de facto personal dictatorship and tyranny of a single individual. Ribbentrop mentions this event in his memoirs, but only as a mere fact, without further political or moral classification. This is an expression of astonishing indifference in view of an event that was unprecedented in German history until then. Never before had a German head of state had people convicted and killed without charge or the opportunity to defend themselves, and then publicly justified this. This illegal action was remarkable in that it was based on at least circumstantial evidence of an actual planned coup d'état.

---

[66] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 44.

[67] Party ideologue *Rosenberg* polemicized against *Stresemann* as an opportunistic and – due to the Litwin affair involving party donations and offices – corrupt profiteer of the revolution. See *Rosenberg*, Novemberköpfe, pp. 279–294, and *Gatzke*, Litwin, pp. 76 ff.

which might have made it possible to legally arrest those involved. [68]It is possible that the arbitrary shootings of 1934 were related to the defeat suffered by the regime that year when it pursued legal political proceedings in the Reichstag fire case. The individuals accused of communist conspiracy in that case had been correctly acquitted.The risk of an acquittal of the
The regime clearly did not want to get involved in the "Schleicher-Röhm conspiracy." Here, too, some contemporary witnesses were helped in rationalizing the process by historical analogy [70]on the one hand [and]their impression of the contemporary history they had experienced firsthand on the other. The era of world wars made the traditional legal system seem manifestly inappropriate to large sections of the bourgeois camp as well. "Murder as a means of politics" had been used frequently in Germany after 1919 due to the Allied occupation and the domestic political struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. In some countries abroad, it had long since turned into mass murder, which also had negative consequences for respect for the rule of law in Germany.([71])

Under these circumstances, and despite his neutral stance on the Röhm affair, Ribbentrop nevertheless occasionally took the initiative to provide support to individuals who, according to the new National Socialist view of things, were considered "non-Aryans." Among those affected was Hans Rothfels, a baptized professor of Jewish origin, war veteran, German nationalist, and well-known university lecturer at the University of Königsberg. Regardless of his past, Rothfels came under Nazi criticism for being an "un-Aryan" university lecturer in German history. The shots fired by the murder and execution squads on June 30, 1934

---

(68) [In]this context, *Konstantin von Neurath*, *the* son of the German foreign minister in office in 1934, was arrested and only released after three days following a personal reception by *Hitler*. *Hitler* cited imminent treason as the reason for his actions, which he attempted to substantiate to *Konstantin von Neurath with* quotations from a "Schleicher diary." See *Heineman,* Neurath, pp. 79 and 274, communication *from Konstantin von Neurath* to *Heineman* dated May 7 and August 20, 1968. The "diary" has apparently not been preserved.

69 On the other hand, there was no Nazi conspiracy to set fire to the Reichstag building in Berlin, as has often been claimed. The Dutch communist *Marinus van der Lubbe* was rightly convicted as the sole perpetrator, but the sentence was increased to death penalty due to a miscarriage of justice. See *Tobias,* Reichstagsbrand, passim. ([70])*Albert Speer* also failed to address this problem in his memoirs. He attempted to explain his equanimity in the face of *Röhm's* execution with an educated bourgeois distraction, referring to *Goethe*, who wrote in "Iphigenia in Tauris" that "even 'the best man' ultimately 'becomes accustomed to cruelty' and 'finally makes a law out of what he abhors', so that he becomes 'hard and almost unrecognizable out of habit'. Cf. *Speer*, Memoirs, p. 532.

71 *Oswald Spengler's* diagnosis of the times in 1922 may provide a corresponding indication: "In just a few years, we have learned to pay little attention to events that would have paralysed the world before the war. Who today still seriously thinks about the millions who are perishing in Russia?" Quoted in *Spengler*, Untergang, p. 1098.

had, metaphorically speaking, barely faded away when a representative of the party leadership on site named Brockhausen once again brought the Rothfels case to the attention of the "Deputy Führer" on July 2, 1934. It was

> "completely out of the question for someone of foreign blood to speak to the next generation about German history. The young people who listen to Professor Rothfels' lectures will be torn apart in their souls precisely because he appears to be amiable and witty on the outside."(72)

As a result, the long-standing plans to take action against Rothfels' professorship became urgent, and Ribbentrop was made aware of the case on July 14, 1934, by Thomas Conwell-Evans, a British lecturer teaching in Königsberg. Rothfels was a "Prussian officer" and an undisputed expert. Although not officially mentioned, his dismissal as a professor might be related to his Jewish origins.[73]Ribbentrop reacted promptly, forwarded Conwell-Evans' letter to the relevant authorities, and four days later, in a cover letter, officially stated in his capacity as "Reich Government Commissioner for Disarmament Issues" that he "warmly" supported the Englishman's request to reconsider Rothfels' dismissal.[74]Once again, it was to no avail, as the decision from the office of the Deputy Führer on July 25 was clear: It was
"However, it is unacceptable for a Jewish professor to teach German history." The Ministry of Culture took the position that the matter was thus settled.[75]Ribbentrop himself received a reply in November which, in addition to referring to history as an "ideological subject"(76)that was impossible for a Jew to teach, repeated the reasoning given in Mr. Brockhausen's letter of denunciation. According to this, a non-Aryan history teacher would drive young people into conflict. Within the internal logic of National Socialist anti-Semitism, there was also some truth in this, in that a learned, military-proven, and patriotic "non-Aryan" would naturally have to constantly question the meaning of the whole Aryan movement, which at this stage of the regime had not yet been formulated as a legal rule. What could not be, must not be.

---

72 Citation BA-KO N 12213/20 a, *Brockhausen* to the Deputy Führer, Staff Headquarters, July 2, 1934.

73 See BA-KO N 12213/20 a, *Conwell-Evans* to *Ribbentrop*, July 14, 1934.

74 See BA-KO N 12213/20 a, *Ribbentrop* to the Minister of Culture, July 18, 1934.

75 See BA-KO N 12213/20 a, Deputy Führer, Reich Leader for Cultural Affairs to Minister of Culture *Rust*, July 25, 1934, and BA-KO N 12213/20 a, response from the Ministry of Culture to the DAAD.

76 In other areas, anti-Jewish measures were less radical and contradictory for a long time, which may also explain *Ribbentrop's* impartial involvement in the *Rothfels* case. The proportion of licensed "non-Aryan" lawyers in Berlin, for example, fell from 73 percent to around 25 percent between 1933 and 1938, and from 27 to 10 percent on average across Germany. Even prominent opponents of the Nazi regime were sometimes allowed to continue practicing law, occasionally despite having been imprisoned in the meantime. See *Stiefel,* Juristen, p. 111.

In 2002, this affair had a mirror-image sequel, precisely because what cannot be cannot be. What Rothfels was unable to save in 1933 from the threat of becoming an outsider and being banned from his profession, made him an outsider again posthumously in view of the reversal of standards at the beginning of the new millennium. Hans Rothfels was labeled a fascist in a dissertation because of his characteristics as a
"learned, soldierly, and patriotic man" in a dissertation. Heinrich August Winkler's polemical response to this attempt highlights the trials and tribulations to which contemporary historiography continues to be subject:

> "Where would we end up if, in the fight against 'Rothfels' fascist conception of history,' we also had to observe the principles of historical source criticism and intellectual integrity? That would mean bowing to the dictates of bourgeois class science. And what would be lost in the process? The good old slogan from 1929: 'Strike the fascists wherever you find them!'"([77])

The balancing act that Ribbentrop's political ambitions required quickly became apparent in his relationship with the SS. Discussions in the run-up to Hitler's takeover had already brought him into contact with Heinrich Himmler, who was involved in organizing the SS. In his search for support within the regime, Himmler became Ribbentrop's frequent point of contact in the years that followed. Word of this got around and raised concerns. When JvR was later officially promoted by the dictator's chief diplomatic advisor to head of foreign policy affairs in the Nazi state, this move was welcomed by the ministry as an opportunity to regain authority and influence over foreign policy. On the other hand, the new foreign minister was said to be very close to Himmler's organization, which was considered dangerous for the independence of the ministry and individual employees. Ribbentrop's relatively close relationship with Heinrich Himmler and the SS at that time was evident, for example, in the fact that Ribbentrop, upon taking office as minister, held a reception for the employees of the Foreign Office in SS uniform. Himmler had already appointed him SS-Standartenführer in May 1933. Around twenty employees from Ribbentrop's office, who were also members of the SS, moved with him to the ministry. ([78])Soon after taking office, the new minister also ensured that long-serving employees and/or those he had recently promoted were also given SS ranks. These included Ernst von Weizsäcker and Ernst Woermann, who were accepted into the SS by Himmler on April 20, 1938, immediately after their appointment as State Secretary and Head of the Political Department of the Foreign Office, respectively.

---

[77] Quoted from TAZ, October 29, 2002, article by *Heinrich August Winkler*.
[78] Cf. *Döscher*, Foreign Office, p. 153.
[79] Cf. *Longerich*, Himmler, p. 407.

Nevertheless, what applied to all other institutions and individuals in the Nazi state also applied to Himmler: Ribbentrop insisted on concentrating all foreign policy powers in the Foreign Ministry and in his own person as far as possible, and rejected any form of parallel foreign policy by prominent Nazis of all persuasions. Although he never succeeded in completely asserting himself, his closeness to Himmler came to an abrupt end in this context. This coincided with a dispute over a matter that directly affected German foreign policy. Ribbentrop put an end to Himmler's foreign policy activities after his agents organized an unauthorized coup attempt in Romania in the spring of 1941. ([80])"It's probably over with H. v. Ribbentrop and Heini. H. v. R. has too many airs and graces," commented Himmler's wife Margarethe.[81]Ribbentrop then demanded that all members of German missions abroad sign a declaration of honor not to work for the SD of the SS or for the Abwehr, and prohibited so-called "police liaison officers" from reporting directly to Himmler, bypassing the Foreign Ministry, as had previously been permitted. After several months of dispute, a formal agreement was reached in which all SS and police personnel working abroad undertook to refrain from any foreign policy activities, to pass on any intelligence material obtained to the Foreign Ministry, and to report to the heads of mission. Overall, this was a success for Ribbentrop, who was able to keep the SS under control at this point. Himmler conceded all this, perhaps because, as Reinhard Heydrich noted in the minutes, it was a "peace agreement that was so important to the RFSS on a purely human level."([82]) This may have been because Himmler apparently believed he had reason to assume that he himself had brought Ribbentrop into politics in 1932. In any case, this is how he presented it at the beginning of 1939. It was certain that the SS was a force within the regime that Ribbentrop could use at times, but only in specific areas of influence.

---

[80] Cf. *Longerich*, Himmler, p. 523.

[81] Entry by *Margarete Himmler* in her diary dated May 8, 1941, quoted here from *Longerich*, Himmler, p. 523. Original diary in USHMM, Acc. 1999.A.0092.

[82] BA Berlin, NS 19/1633, statement by *Heydrich* to *Wolff* dated August 5, 1941. For the negotiations, cf. PA-AA, Inland Iig 61, letter *from Heydrich* to *Weizsäcker*, dated June 20, 1941.

[83] BA Berlin, NS 19/1446, notes on *Himmler's* remarks at lunch on January 30, 1939.

III. Ambassador behind the scenes at

1. Between London and Paris

> "Germany must be defeated again, and this time for good. Otherwise, France and England will have no peace."
>
> Winston Churchill (1934)[1]

Although Ribbentrop would later claim to have acted politically "between London and Moscow," his first steps on the European stage were directed toward neighboring France. He had business contacts there and was as fluent in French as he was in English. The Ribbentrop family name was also somewhat more closely linked to German-French history than to German-English history, as the Ribbentrops had fought in the service of the King of Prussia in the continental wars of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the process, they had earned decorations, occasional prominence, and ultimately a title of nobility. In the spring of 1814, the General Commissioner of the Prussian Army, Friedrich von Ribbentrop, was able to find the quadriga of the Brandenburg Gate in Paris,[3] which had been dismantled in 1806 on Napoleon's orders and taken to France. Friedrich von Ribbentrop had previously been able to help shape Gerhard von Scharnhorst's reforms as his colleague and had also been involved in the internal German preparations for an uprising against the French occupation.[4] These details were long forgotten by 1933, but they were among the circumstances that set Joachim von Ribbentrop apart from those whom Hitler otherwise considered reliable enough as National Socialists to initially become active in areas of secondary foreign policy, which he wanted to pursue bypassing the Foreign Office. Ribbentrop's family history

---

[1] Quoted from *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 31.

[2] *Ribbentrop's* son *Rudolf* mentions in his memoirs that he did not want to be left behind in the long line of those who had been awarded the Iron Cross. Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Erlebnisse, p. 280.

[3] Cf. BA-KO, NL 1163/13 Ribbentrop and Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie, vol. 28, Leipzig 1889, p. 400, article *Ribbentrop, Friedrich Wilhelm Christian Johann*. According to the title of a book that can no longer be found in libraries, *Friedrich von Ribbentrop* is said to have been a Freemason: Dr. *Albrecht Erlenmeyer:* Friedrich Ribbentrop als Freimaurer, self-published, Bendorf/Rh. 1903. See also Gelehrtes Leben in Berlin im Jahr 1825 mit einer Lebensbeschreibung des Friedrich von Ribbentrop, Berlin 1826.

[4] *Ribbentrop* kept in touch with *Ferdinand von Schill* and warned him of his impending arrest before his attempted uprising in the spring of 1809. See *Gerd Fresser*: Husarenritt in den Tod (Hussar Ride to Death), in: Die Zeit, August 12, 2009.

illustrates the widespread willingness at the time to link one's own ambition with going to war for Prussia-Germany at the risk of one's own life. To a certain extent, it explains the sense of mission of Hitler's top diplomat.

Since 1919, and immediately after Hitler came to power, the French Republic had presented itself as the European power that wanted to use the victory in World War I in various ways to permanently eliminate Germany as an economic and military power. Not least, France's unwillingness to compromise on the disarmament issues negotiated in Geneva had made it possible for Germany to withdraw from the negotiations and the League of Nations with little political consequence. Through Ribbentrop's mediation, Hitler then gave an interview to two internationally renowned journalists in which he explained this step – to the Englishman George Ward Price for the Rothermere Press ("Daily Mail") and the Frenchman Fernand de Brinon for the Parisian "Matin". Brinon was a frequent guest in Ribbentrop's private sphere and became a long-standing contact,[5] who was eventually appointed ambassador to Germany by Head of State Pétain in 1940. After the Allies recaptured France, he was later convicted and executed.

On the other hand, despite its opposition to international disarmament, the French government, like the British, was opposed to the offensive plans against Germany that Poland's dictator Josef Pilsudski had sounded out in Paris in 1932/33.[6] A Polish march on Berlin was planned in Warsaw and feared in the German capital. However, it was not yet on the international agenda. Annoyed by this, Pilsudski then made a sweeping U-turn and finally had the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact signed on January 26, 1934, which, after Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations and debt servicing, represented a positive success for National Socialist foreign policy.[7] Ribbentrop was not involved in the conclusion of this agreement. At that time, he was trying to initiate talks between the leaders in Paris and London, but especially in Paris, and the new National Socialist government. André François-Poncet, the long-standing French ambassador to Berlin and Rome, later excused the current policy of 1938 with the many missed opportunities in those early years of the Nazi regime, which were linked to Ribbentrop's diplomatic travels:

---

[5] Through his contact with *de Brinon*, *Ribbentrop* attempted, for example, to bring about a Franco-Italian understanding in the spring of 1939. See *Ciano*, Diaries, p. 35, February 6, 1939.

[6] At the beginning of the 1930s, a limited offensive against Germany had been planned on this basis, at that time a so-called "preventive attack" against the Weimar Republic. See *Roos*, Poland, p. 6.

[7] See text of the agreement in ADAP, C, II, 1, Doc. 219, signed by Foreign Minister *v. Neurath* and Ambassador *Lipski*.

François-Poncet also pointed out that at the end of 1933, the Führer had offered to build up a 300,000-strong army and be content with half of the French air force. He, François-Poncet, had urgently passed this offer on to Paris at the time, had repeatedly reminded them, but had never received a reply from the Führer"(8)

It had been Ribbentrop's task to present such offers in Hitler's name, bypassing the usual diplomatic channels in Paris and London. Germany's demonstrative withdrawal from the League of Nations did not alter the course of these negotiations, which took place partly in Berlin at the turn of 1933/34 and had earned Ribbentrop his first title. On February 20, 1934, he attended a meeting at the Reich Chancellery as the "Reich Government's representative for disarmament issues." Present were Foreign Minister Neurath, Reich Minister of Defense Blomberg, British Ambassador Eric Phipps, William Strang, head of the League of Nations department in the British Foreign Office, the current Lord Privy Seal Anthony Eden, and Hitler. Ribbentrop's participation as the only person without a government position was a point of distinction, ultimately for both sides, because Eden could easily have refused to allow such a person without government rank to participate in a highly official diplomatic meeting.[9] In fact, this was to remain the only instance of Ribbentrop's presence in a whole series of talks that Eden held with Hitler and the German Foreign Ministry during this exploratory trip to the continent.[10] Eden undertook a fact-finding trip that also took him to Rome and Paris to gauge the respective governments' reactions to a British memorandum on the question of disarmament, which had also been presented to Italy and France. [11] Here, too, the debate proceeded within the usual framework. Hitler showed himself willing to comply fully with the British proposals set out in the memorandum. However, he demanded immediate concessions on defensive weapons and clarification of the key points *before* Germany's return to the League of Nations, to which he was prepared to agree. Eden, on the other hand, repeatedly emphasized that, in his view, the negotiations would be better conducted within the framework of the League of Nations, i.e., *after* Germany's return to it.[12]

In Paris, little attention was paid to Eden's tour and the English memorandum. Foreign Minister Louis Barthou exchanged a few friendly words with Ribbentrop and occasionally hinted that he wanted to say more. To Bot-

---

[8] PA AA R 27091, p. 29037, DR report of November 3, 1938.

[9] *Ribbentrop* did not receive the "official status" of "Reich Government Representative for Disarmament Questions" until two months later. See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 405, *Neurath* to the embassies in Paris and London, April 18, 1934.

[10] The DBFP lists six talks that *Eden* held in Berlin between February 20 and 22, 1934, some of them with *Hitler* at the British Embassy.

[11] See DBFP, Sec. Series, VI, Doc. 206, pp. 214–224,

[12] See ADAP, C, III/2, Doc. 271, p. 500 ff., discussion in the Reich Chancellery.

However, in what was apparently a generally tense conversation, he made clear his rejection of Köster's proposal. Barthou responded positively to Hitler's declarations of agreement in principle, but the English memorandum demanded French disarmament while Germany was allowed to rearm. Barthou categorically rejected this and, according to Köster's report, expressed his hope that the English government would be overthrown.[13] He also referred to a newly established subcommittee of the French government on disarmament. However, as Köster had learned, apart from the vague proposals of spring 1932 on the internationalization of armed forces, this subcommittee had essentially only established three positions:

– No disarmament of France

– No rearmament of Germany

– Increase in the combat readiness of the French army, financed by a loan of one billion francs. [14]

This would have been consistent insofar as financial interests were apparently directly responsible for the repeated failure of disarmament negotiations. The dismissal of Reich Chancellor Brüning, for example, was linked to the fact that President Hindenburg "learned from a German industrialist that French heavy industry preferred the rearmament of Germany to multilateral disarmament of all nations."([15]) In this respect the breakdown of negotiations and the subsequent rearmament on all sides also paved the way for good business.

Barthou informed Köster that, through the mediation of Count Jean Castellane, he had already spoken with Ribbentrop, who was a man of manners, "with whom one could converse about Richard Wagner even better than with the current ambassador in Paris," i.e., with Köster himself.[16] The German diplomat, who had been mocked in this way, reacted irritably and inquired in Berlin about Ribbentrop and his personality, which apparently prompted a comment from Foreign Minister Neurath intended for President Hindenburg. He merely – and incorrectly – introduced Ribbentrop to the German head of state as a "long-standing member of the NSDAP" who enjoyed the special trust of the Reich Chancellor and was active in London and Paris with the knowledge of the Foreign Office.

> "Agents of a similar kind have been active before, and especially since the war. Their success and usefulness is usually limited. ... Now Mr. Barthou has sent the message..."

---

[13] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 301, p. 548 f., *Köster's* report to the Foreign Office on a conversation with *Barthou* on March 7, 1934.

[14] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 301, p. 549, *Köster's* report to the Foreign Office on a conversation with *Barthou* on March 7, 1934.

[15] Cf. *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 370.

[16] Cf. ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 301, p. 550, *Köster's* report to the Foreign Office on a conversation with *Barthou* on March 7, 1934.

Ambassador Köster criticized the manner in which Mr. von Ribbentrop was introduced. Secret reports indicate that Mr. Barthou was not particularly pleased with the visit and therefore treated Mr. von Ribbentrop with marked sarcasm."[17]

Barthou's sarcasm was directed more at the official diplomacy of the German Foreign Office, and Neurath failed to provide any evidence of "secret messages" to the contrary. In his message to Köster about this incident, he also stated that he himself had staged the report to the Reich President. Hindenburg had never made any inquiry on this subject. Now the president was supposed to have spoken out against Ribbentrop's appointment. Whether this was true and whether such a statement by Hindenburg would have been repeated in an objective presentation of the facts is doubtful, to say the least. ([18]) This was one of many intrigues against Ribbentrop by the Foreign Office, with many more to follow. Beyond that, however, this was also an attempt to cut off Chancellor Hitler from possible sources of information and to deny him any means of influence other than the Foreign Office. Regardless of this, and probably unaware of the incident, Hitler again instructed Ribbentrop to invite Barthou to visit Germany.[19]At the end of April, Ribbentrop officially received his title as "Reich Government Representative for Disarmament Questions," as already mentioned. Neurath, however, used this again to require him, in the corresponding message to the Paris and London embassies, to consult with the embassy in advance for any activity and to be accompanied by the head of mission or a representative.[20] The Foreign Office endeavored to keep German foreign policy on its usual course, even though this usual course was not very flexible and did not necessarily correspond to international customs. It was no problem at all for heads of government and other officials in Western countries to meet with unofficial envoys from other countries. The decisive factor was whether or not these visits were beneficial. ([21])

---

[17] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 314, p. 568, *Neurath's* notes for *Hindenburg* dated March 10, 1934.

[18] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 343, p. 632, letter *from Neurath* to *Köster* dated March 15, 1934. *Hermann Graml* assumes the authenticity of the statements and says that *Hindenburg* was "coerced" by the Foreign Office, but mistakenly names *Hoesch* as the one who allegedly spoke of useless "agents." See *Graml,* England, p. 59.

[19] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 392, p. 717, *Bülow* to the Embassy in Paris, April 10, 1934.

[20] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 405, p. 735, *Neurath* to the embassies in Paris and London, April 18, 1934.

[21] Despite *Neurath's* choice of words, *Ribbentrop* apparently assumed in the following weeks that he had the authority to issue instructions to the embassies and to amend decrees issued by the Foreign Minister to the embassies. An instruction *from Neurath* to *Leopold Hoesch* in London on how to respond to an expected statement by the British government was apparently drafted and edited by *Ribbentrop*. See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 63, p. 127 ff., July 5, 1934.

In his new capacity, Ribbentrop traveled to London and Rome, following in Eden's footsteps, so to speak, to discuss disarmament issues with Eden and John Simon, as well as Mussolini. Both discussions focused primarily on the question of how, in view of France's intransigence, time could be gained without any of the parties involved appearing to be the one who had given in. As a direct result of the talks, Mussolini sent feelers to London, but to no avail, as Robert Vansittart had meanwhile prevailed with his consistently negative stance on these very issues.(24) In an effort to leave no stone unturned, Ribbentrop then visited the US ambassador in Berlin, William Dodd, on June 15. He held out the prospect of Germany's return to the League of Nations and the start of disarmament talks within this framework if France would only make a few minor concessions beforehand. Dodd felt he was being "probed," as he himself had suggested exactly this course of action to his French colleague François-Poncet, which Ribbentrop was now offering. Despite agreeing with the content, the US ambassador responded evasively, offering general criticism of German trade policy and anti-Semitic German legislation without elaborating on his own ideas. Ribbentrop "acted surprised and appeared somewhat concerned as he left."[25] It seemed impossible for Dodd to respond more positively, even though he accompanied the corresponding report to Washington about his conversation with Ribbentrop and other talks he had had during those days with impressions that suggested the existence of a real chance for understanding. The US ambassador was unable to fully empathize with the German situation,[26]

---

[22] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 443, p. 787 ff., record dated May 10, 1934.

[23] See ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 456, p. 808 ff., record dated May 18, 1934. In addition to *Mussolini* and *Ribbentrop*, State Secretary *Fulvio Suvich* and *Ulrich von Hassell* were also present.

[24] Cf. ADAP, C, II/2, Doc. 464, p. 824 ff., report by *Hoesch* to *Neurath* and *Ribbentrop* on the Anglo-Italian talks and his own talks on May 25, 1934.

[25] See *Dodd*, Diplomat, p. 133, entry dated June 15, 1934.

[26] *Dodd's* entire diary is peppered with abstruse speculations about the German national character and historical contexts, which apparently made it impossible for him to assess international relations objectively. Among other things, he writes: "No German seems ever to have thought that it is wrong to seize the territory of another people. This is the result of a tradition dating back centuries." *Dodd,* Diplomat, p. 482, November 18, 1937. The fact that the United States, represented by Dodd, was located entirely on the "territory of other peoples" had escaped this self-perception. Objectively speaking, the Germany of November 1937 was also a small Central European state, surrounded by several empires that spanned all parts of the world and consisted of territories that had formed a confederation since the Middle Agesor from the remnants of this confederation, insofar as other states had not "usurped the territory of this people" in the same way as most of the rest of the world. This passage was too much even for the communist editors of his diaries, albeit for entirely different reasons: "*Dodd* overlooks the tireless struggle of German anti-fascists led by the KPD against the annexation policy of German imperialism." (sic) Cf. ibid. p. 521.

But he did notice a little awareness of the danger on the German side, including in a conversation with State Secretary Bülow. Ribbentrop's proposal came up again:

> "Von Bülow added: 'We would like to see a conference of the great powers that have signed the Kellogg Pact, at which a peace treaty involving Germany, France, England, Italy, and the United States will be agreed upon.' This is close to the proposal Ribbentrop made on Friday. Hopefully, the Germans are aware of the terrible risks of their position and are sincere in their proposals to Italy and France. François-Poncet is still in Paris; perhaps he will achieve more there than he could have done here."(27)

In fact, the course of events depended less on the honesty of German diplomacy than on France's willingness to compromise, which François-Poncet attempted to gauge in Paris. From the German point of view, another peace treaty that would officially replace the Treaty of Versailles and, with the involvement of the US – which had signed the Treaty of Versailles but then allowed it to fail in Congress – would put intra-European relations on a new footing, had to be an ideal scenario. Admittedly, this would also make the revisionist goals developed by von Bülow himself in his memorandum the previous year a distant prospect, since in the situation of 1934 German diplomacy could hardly have achieved much more than the territorial status quo. It might have been possible to discuss the restoration of military defense capabilities, the deletion of the clause assigning sole guilt, and improved financial arrangements in such a treaty, and perhaps also referendums in the Saarland, Danzig, and the Memel Territory, but certainly not the "total solution" in Poland or the annexation of Austria that von Bülow had demanded at the time. The five states mentioned had already recognized Germany's legitimate claim "to equality of rights in a system that guarantees security for all nations" in a five-power declaration of December 11, 1932.[28]This idea could now be pursued further, and Ribbentrop traveled to Paris in the footsteps of François-Poncet to move things forward.

One day after the meeting with Dodd, on June 16, Ribbentrop met again with the French representative in charge of this matter, Barthou. In the meantime, Ambassador Köster had once again had one of his heated discussions with the Frenchman, who liked to use undiplomatic language toward Köster, saying that he "didn't give a damn" about Mussolini's invitation and would not allow "Germany to get into bed with Yugoslavia."(29) Apart from this choice of words, there was little new to report on Köster's part.

---

[27] Quoted from *Dodd*, Diplomat, p. 135 f., entry dated June 18, 1934.

[28] The five powers involved were the USA, France, Great Britain, England, and Italy. Quoted in *Gathorne-Hardy*, Politics, p. 403.

[29] See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 4, p. 6 ff., *Köster* to AA dated June 15, 1934.

Ribbentrop's visit, on the other hand, seemed to have taken place in a better atmosphere. According to Ribbentrop's notes, Barthou even spoke explicitly of his confidence in the German leadership and in the person of the new chancellor, as well as of his desire to reach an understanding with Germany. He also held out the prospect of a visit to Berlin to meet Hitler in person and asked for further contacts via Ribbentrop.[30] The overall tone of the notes was so optimistic that Ribbentrop felt compelled to emphasize their veracity: "The above account accurately reflects the conversation as it took place."[31] This was quite unusual for Barthou, who was otherwise so frosty toward German diplomacy, and in retrospect, one might consider this appearance to be an act, because Barthou was now apparently hoping for progress in a completely different direction. After London, Moscow was the second of those European political capitals that were particularly memorable in Ribbentrop's policy.

Strictly speaking, however, it was not Moscow that had responded, but rather Barthou's policy that had brought it back to Europe. Barthou was working on a project for an Eastern Pact that would integrate the Soviet Union into a so-called European security system, which Berlin rightly perceived as an attempt to use new means to reestablish the status quo and Germany's inability to defend itself. Ribbentrop would later often recount the episode, saying that Barthou had told him he had to "go east" before a Franco-German reconciliation could take place. In a conversation with Alexis Léger, the secretary general of the French Foreign Ministry, shortly after his meeting with Barthou, Ribbentrop learned that these eastern plans were a French idea that Moscow had ultimately agreed to. Léger not only said this, but also stated bluntly that "if Germany were to reject these plans, ... then France would certainly conclude a pact with Russia for itself." This is what happened a year later, and it could be said that this French shift marked the beginning of the escalation of European politics, which was to lead to a "cold" war in 1936 and finally to a "hot" war in 1939. Instead of a new five-power peace treaty based on the already recognized equality, as had been proposed by Ribbentrop, among others, the unilateral French move prompted a chain of reciprocal unilateral steps. Hitler responded to the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet treaty by announcing that, if the treaty were ratified, he would remilitarize the Rhineland.

---

[30] See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 31, p. 73 ff., Record of the conversation *between Ribbentrop and Barthou* on June 16, 1934.

[31] See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 31, p. 77.

[32] For example, to *David Lloyd George* in the summer of 1936. See *Jones*, Diary, p. 241, August 30, 1936.

[33] Cf. ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 31, p. 78, *Ribbentrop's* notes of June 21, 1934, on his conversation with *Léger*.

which is what happened in the spring of 1936. Barthou, who had expressed doubts to Ribbentrop about this pro-Soviet course of French policy, was murdered shortly after the conversation in the fall of 1934, together with the King of Yugoslavia, upon his arrival at the port of Marseille. The assassin was a Bulgarian communist known by many names, including the surname of the then head of the Comintern: Dimitrov.

2. 's 1935 naval agreement

> "Then the Führer turned in partly sharp, partly humorous words against the intellectual class, who always said that German propaganda was unfair; if one listened only to them, nothing at all would be achieved. He said he had received many letters proving this and cited as an example the criticism of a civil servant in Berlin who, before the conclusion of the naval agreement of June 1935, advocated a possible target of only 15% of the English fleet strength and considered anything more impossible. Mr. von Ribbentrop then negotiated 35%, whereupon the official in question again criticized that it was not 40 to 60%. He, the Führer, then fired this official."
>
> Report from the Ribbentrop Office[35]

As the representative for disarmament issues, Ribbentrop gradually found himself more and more in the place where he would later serve as ambassador. In 1934, the British government was much more flexible than the French on armament and disarmament issues. Despite the reserved attitude of some political circles, London initially proved to be a rather pleasant place for Ribbentrop to stay. In talks with Foreign Minister John Simon and Lord Privy Seal Anthony Eden in November 1934, he was able to make noticeable progress in almost all areas. Since resistance to an international agreement was clearly coming from France, the corresponding argument was obvious, and Ribbentrop made use of it. Germany was ready to sign an international disarmament agreement at any time, but now it did not look as if this would come about. Sooner or later, therefore, Germany would have to

---

[34]There has been much speculation about the background to the assassination. According to some sources, *Dimitrov* renounced communism and became a national separatist. However, this would have been in line with the Comintern's policy at the time of promoting nationalism in Europe. The assassination is generally regarded as an attack on the king and, in this context, is sometimes even implied to have been inspired by Germany. However, the assassin jumped onto the front of the car and shot *Barthou,* whom he also hit from the front. King *Alexander*, on the other hand, was shot in the back, presumably by bodyguards.

[35]PA AA R 27091, p. 29044 f., DR report on *Hitler's* speech on November 10, 1938, to the German press at the Führerbau in Munich.

Ribbentrop informed his English counterparts that Germany would respond to any action taken by the United Kingdom, apparently without encountering any opposition. At the same time, he was able to announce that, in any case, Germany would not seek to match the strength of the British armed forces in terms of naval or air power. In both areas, England could and should maintain the strongest armed forces in Europe. Eden and Simon may have taken this for granted anyway, but it was nevertheless a clear signal when the Treaty of Versailles was no longer mentioned in these discussions. In his report, Ribbentrop considered the complete annulment of Part V, with its unilateral arms limitations, to be a matter to be addressed within the next few months. (36) In fact, it would only be a few weeks before Hitler publicly declared these provisions null and void in March 1935 – initially without any further negative consequences.

Ribbentrop's old contact with Thomas Conwell-Evans ensured further success on the British Isles. The former lecturer at Königsberg University, who had brought the Rothfels case to his attention a few months earlier, prompting Ribbentrop to try to do something for the Jewish-born, German nationalist historian who was threatened with professional exclusion, now introduced him in England to Philipp Kerr, the former private secretary of War Premier David Lloyd George, who had since been promoted to Marquess of Lothian. Lothian was interested in the situation in Germany and wanted to meet discreetly with the state leadership during an upcoming trip. Conwell-Evans would accompany him and stay with Ribbentrop in Berlin. Ambassador Hoesch could hardly suppress his enthusiasm about this development:

> "Lord Lothian is one of the most influential non-official figures in England and is undoubtedly the most important non-official Englishman who has ever requested an audience with the Reich Chancellor. He is well disposed towards Germany and would like to contribute to improving understanding between Germany and England. I would strongly recommend that he be granted the audiences he has requested and that, in particular, the Reich Chancellor receive him personally."(37)

Hitler was inclined to follow this recommendation without hesitation, offered a meeting on January 29, and asked Foreign Minister Neurath to attend. Once again, however, Neurath apparently felt that Ribbentrop's intervention had deprived him of control in these matters and did not actually take part in the meeting that ultimately took place, as he also told British Ambassador Phipps in no uncertain terms.[38]Both career diplomats seemed to agree on

---

[36] Cf. ADAP, C, III/2, Doc. 333, p. 624.

[37] Quoted from ADAP, C, III/2, Doc. 445, p. 818, *Hoesch* to AA on January 17, 1935.

[38] Present were *Rudolf Hess* as minister, *Ribbentrop*, and *Conwell-Evans* as interpreter. Cf. cited in ADAP, C, III/2, p. 818, and DBFP, II, Vol. 12, Doc. 391, Ambassador *Phipps* to Secretary of State *Simon*, January 30, 1935.

agreed on this issue, because Phipps also expressed his obvious reluctance in his report to Minister Simon about the English private individuals who were appearing here in Berlin "in increasing numbers" as peace envoys. Since, on top of that, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, Robert Vansittart, expressly declared his solidarity with Neurath and Phipps and wanted to do everything in his power to prevent further trips of this kind, a strange German-English constellation of professional jealousy and principled opposition to Ribbentrop emerged. His informal approach had effects that were not welcome. In addition, all three, or at least the two British men, agreed in rejecting a demand that Hitler had made to Ambassador Phipps at the end of the previous year and repeated to Lothian: he had specified a figure of thirty-five percent of the fleet strength that Germany should be entitled to in relation to the British navy.[39]Phipps had pretended not to hear, as he now reported in his account of the Lothian trip. [40]Hearing difficulties were a tried and tested method that was to be used more frequently by Germany's future enemies on the eve of the outbreak of war in 1939. In fact, the acting British ambassador was one of those diplomats in Berlin who considered National Socialism to be completely unacceptable and personally regarded the head of state as a kind of predator, about whom Phipps officially reported after his first meeting with him after June 30, 1934, in November of that year "had my nationality and status not protected me, I would probably have become part of his dinner·"(41)

The meeting between Hitler and Lothian, which Ribbentrop had arranged outside the usual diplomatic channels, had taken place in a relaxed atmosphere. Afterwards, Lothian remained one of those who believed that a German-English reconciliation was possible in principle, even under Hitler's government. This was still the case during his tenure as British ambassador in Washington in 1940, when, after the defeat of France, he urgently recommended acceptance of the German peace offer presented at the Washington embassy, whose terms he described as "highly satisfactory."(42)

---

39 DBFP, II, Vol. 12, Doc. 230, Ambassador *Phipps* to Secretary of State *Simon*, November 28, 1934.

40 DBFP, II, Vol. 12, Doc. 391, p. 453, Ambassador *Phipps* to Secretary of State *Simon*, January 30, 1935.

(41) DBFP, II, Vol. 12, Doc. 230, Ambassador Phipps

41 DBFP, II, Vol. 12, Doc. 230, Ambassador *Phipps* to Secretary of State *Simon*, November 28, 1934. A memo from Ribbentrop's office dated November 7, 1936, noted that *Phipps* lacked "the intellectual and political stature necessary for Berlin." It was hoped that his imminent dismissal would be hastened by appropriate reports. See ADAP, C, VI/I, Doc. 8, November 7, 1936.

42 See the entry in *Harold Nicolson's* diary following a telephone call from *Lothian* in Washington to the Foreign Office in London: "July 22, 1940: *Lothian* claims to know the German peace terms; they are highly satisfactory." Quoted in *Nicolson*, Diaries, p. 399.

Lothian maintained this position of willingness to negotiate on principle until his death at the end of 1940.

Despite resistance from professional diplomats on both sides, England was initially to become the scene of an extraordinary success for Ribbentrop's negotiating tactics in 1935. Against all odds, he succeeded in obtaining British approval in London for a bilateral German-English agreement on the strength of the two countries' fleets. This agreement had previously been considered extremely unlikely for several reasons, the two most important of which are mentioned here:

– By the standards of the time, naval armament was no longer a matter that could or was negotiated bilaterally. Due to the special nature of naval armament, which resulted from the principle of global deployability of the ships built, the difficulties of class classification, and the absolute superiority of capital ships over all other classes of ships, international naval armament had therefore been the subject of intensive multilateral negotiations since 1919. The Washington Naval Treaty of February 1922 then set the ratio of the naval strength of the US, England, Japan, Italy, and France at a basic level of 100:100:60:35:35 percent.

– At that time and until 1935, the strength of the German fleet was determined by the Treaty of Versailles, which was part of the League of Nations system and, in fact, constituted its founding document. By concluding the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the British government committed a flagrant breach of the Treaty of Versailles and at the same time devalued the League of Nations.

This raises the question of why the British government nevertheless concluded this agreement, which used up some of the credit that would have been necessary for an international policy under British leadership within the framework of the League of Nations. In any case, it was a relatively quick decision. The immediate history of this naval agreement began on March 26, 1935, at a meeting between Hitler and a high-ranking British delegation consisting of the then Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon and Anthony Eden. Several talks took place in similar constellations in the days before and after, at which Ribbentrop's presence is not always documented. It can be assumed that he was present for the discussion on the fleet issue. On this occasion, John Simon invited a German delegation to London for preparatory talks for an international naval conference and, on his own initiative, brought up the subject of Germany's possible naval aspirations, which he would like to learn about, emphasizing that he was making "this proposal without prejudice to the provisions of the treaty currently in force," i.e., without committing himself to the Treaty of Versailles, among other things.[43]Simon then himself brought up the

[43] See ADAP, C, 3/II, Doc. 555, p. 1042.

He brought up the figure of thirty-five percent, which had often been mentioned by German diplomats, but described it as too high, conceding that France had now achieved more than the thirty-five percent it was actually entitled to in relation to British armaments, namely more than fifty percent due to loopholes in the treaty. Hitler's response stuck to the German figure:

> "With 35%, Germany accepts England's absolute supremacy at sea. It does so not only for a limited time, but fundamentally and forever. Conversely, he could not recognize the supremacy of France or Italy in naval armaments."(44)

Indeed, from the English point of view, it was perhaps not easy to argue why a future German navy should also be weaker than those of France and Italy, thus becoming fourth-rate in international comparison. If the Versailles provisions were to be abolished in principle, then it would be difficult to deny Germany equal rights vis-à-vis these countries, especially since, in the background, the Soviet Union, which was not bound by any naval agreements, was free to arm itself in the Baltic Sea region, which was directly in Germany's sphere of interest, and was in fact doing so.[45]Under these circumstances, agreement was reached on the planned trip to London by the German delegation, which was ultimately led by Ribbentrop. The fact that this did not result in preparatory talks for a conference, but rather in a bilateral German-English treaty, was in fact attributable to Ribbentrop. He opened the British-German talks with two demands:

> "Based on previous experience in negotiations with the British, it seemed right to me to establish the ratio of 100:35 for Anglo-German naval strength desired by the Führer as a 'conditio sine qua non' right from the start. Furthermore, I considered it necessary that we conclude a fixed treaty with England that would take effect immediately."(46)

This was an unusual way of conducting negotiations by German standards, but in this case it was intended to lead directly to the desired outcome. On the one hand, it was something of a snub to John Simon, who, instead of a basis for negotiation, was presented with clear conditions at a point where, as he himself noted, such conditions would normally only be presented at the end of negotiations, not at the beginning. Shortly after making this remark, Simon left the meeting with the excuse that he still had to speak to Prime Minister MacDonald. (47)However, this may also have been due to the fact that

---

44 Quoted in ADAP, C, 3/II, Doc. 555, p. 1044 f.

45 In fact, shortly after the German-British naval agreement at the end of 1935, *Stalin* took the initiative to build a new large Soviet fleet, which, according to the plans that were ultimately decided upon, was to comprise a total of 15 battleships, 47 cruisers, and 198 destroyers of various types, as well as 441 submarines. This completely exceeded the arms limitations agreed upon in Washington and London. See *Rohwer,* Fleet, p. 858.

46 Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 62. The record of this opening meeting confirms this account. See ADAP, C, 3/1, Doc. 131, p. 252, June 4, 1935.

47 Cf. ADAP, C, 3/1, Doc. 131, p. 254, June 4, 1935.

On the other hand, he, like the entire British delegation, was satisfied with the offer. Referring to the actual fifty percent strength of the French fleet compared to the English and the Soviet Union, Ribbentrop could theoretically have initially demanded a strength for the German fleet similar to that of Japan, which was dissatisfied with the agreement, i.e., sixty percent of the English fleet. And if no agreement could be reached in these negotiations, the German navy could theoretically have freely armed itself in this area and determined its own requirements, as was done in the land and air forces at that time. Ribbentrop's double proposal thus contained a concession to England in both elements, which Ribbentrop himself was aware of.[48]Although, as mentioned above, the final conclusion of the treaty represented an act of high-handedness on the part of England and a breach of the Treaty of Versailles, it also committed the German side to a low level of armament, which could then be regarded as a precedent for a possible international conference. This was a considerable advantage, given that in the previous two years, every proposed and accepted German arms limitation had failed due to French resistance, until Hitler himself proclaimed the introduction of a German army at his own discretion. A similar situation in the naval sector was now out of the question. The former British fleet commander, Grand Admiral Earl Beatty, explicitly acknowledged this advantage in the British House of Lords:

> "I believe that we owe the Germans our thanks. They came to us with outstretched hands and declared that they agreed to a strength ratio of 35:100. If they had made other proposals, we would not have been able to prevent them. The fact that we now have at least *one* country in the world from which we need not fear an arms race is truly something for which we must be grateful."(49)

Beatty was alluding to the impending collapse of the naval arms limitation established after World War I. With the Washington Treaty of 1922 set to expire in 1936, there was the possibility of an unchecked arms race. Across the Atlantic and in the Pacific, plans were already underway. Shortly after taking office in 1933, US President Roosevelt had already approved substantial funds for naval armament. New classes of battleships were designed and, from 1936 onwards, also built, until finally, in 1941, 170 American warships were under construction at the same time – one year before the United States entered the war. The
also organized American merchant shipping for

---

48 Cf. ADAP, D, XIII/2, Appendix I, p. 824, July 13, 1941. *Ribbentrop's* conversation with the envoy to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, *Açikalin,* in the presence of the Turkish ambassador *Gerede*.

49 Admiral *Beatty* on June 26, 1935, before the House of Lords, quoted here from *Raeder*, Mein Leben, p. 24.

50 Cf. Time, January 27, 1941, p. 12 ff.

Purposes of "national defense" completely new. [51]Extensive armament plans could also already be observed in Japan at that time. This was now formally ruled out, at least in German-British relations, which from the British point of view could be a first step toward calming the international scene. In the postwar period, Ribbentrop's actions were viewed critically, especially in Germany, with little regard for the context of 1935. For a variety of reasons, the naval agreement became one of the reasons for criticism of Ribbentrop as a person, although an overall view of the various reasons then reveals the ambivalence of the circumstances at the time. Joachim Fest condemned Ribbentrop's negotiating tactics in his biography of Hitler:

> "Arrogant and narrow-minded as he was, he clearly lacked any sense of what he was asking of the other side ... So the surprise was all the greater when, two days later, the British requested a new meeting, which they opened with the announcement that the British government had decided to accept the Reich Chancellor's demands as the basis for further naval talks between the two countries."(52)

Other literature on the subject also essentially confines itself to stating that England's behavior was surprising and seeks the reasons for this in appeasement or weakness. The actual advantages for England are hardly seen anywhere. Perhaps a look at the German military's assessment at the time will help. Looking back, Military Attaché Schweppenburg described the German-English naval agreement concluded by Ribbentrop in 1935 as "a free and favorable deal for England,"(53)for which the Admiralty had temporarily abandoned its "cool, opaque" rigidity. He did not mention Ribbentrop, the negotiator, at this point. However, in a separate section devoted to the ambassador, it states quite clearly:

> "There are three things a German ambassador in London should know: The Englishman will not allow anyone in the world to dictate manners in his own country, he will not allow himself to be pressured, and it is not advisable to conclude commercial transactions with him without reciprocity (sic) and then expect him to be accommodating in other matters (fleet agreement)."[54]

Schweppenburg was unable to overcome his aversion to Ribbentrop at this point. A trade deal without English consideration certainly did not constitute the naval agreement, despite the advantages for Great Britain. Ribbentrop was by no means the only one who, as a result of the agreement, saw an all-

---

[51] The introduction and "Declaration of Policy" of the resolution mentioned this purpose several times and always in the first place. See http://www.usmm.org/mmact1936.html, last accessed on June 25, 2012.

[52] Quoted from *Fest*, Hitler, p. 675.

[53] See *Schweppenburg*, Memoirs, p. 75.

[54] Quoted from *Schweppenburg*, Memoirs, p. 114.

hoped for general British goodwill. Three years later, Konstantin von Neurath and Fleet Commander Raeder still addressed this issue with British Ambassador Henderson in Berlin.[55] Why it should be impossible to reach a similar German-British agreement on other issues, in which the National Socialists would establish a Greater Germany with a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the British imperialists would "retain their empire and the world"[56]was not apparent, given the course of events to date and within the categories in which international politics was conducted in the second half of the 1930s.

Other contemporary statements also indicate that the fleet agreement was a win-win venture that brought considerable advantages to both sides. In this way, Germany overcame the Treaty of Versailles and was able to build a modern fleet capable of forming alliances. At the same time, however, the British navy achieved a significant concession, as the German navy was classified as a third-class naval power alongside Italy and France, according to the categories of the Washington Agreement. 10 0 : 100 : 60 : 35 : 35 was the rough ratio of strength between the participating states USA:England:Japan:France and Italy according to the Washington Agreement. If the German navy claimed its 35 percent of British strength, it would be roughly as strong as the French or Italian navies and thus integrate itself into the existing treaty system, which the British wanted to extend.

The aforementioned limit on German naval armament was apparently the result of an agreement between Ribbentrop and Hitler himself. In his memoirs, Ribbentrop writes that he had named the 35 percent quota as a "conditio sine qua non" at Hitler's request right at the beginning of the negotiations. As we have seen, Ribbentrop's negotiating partner on the British side was John Simon, who had traveled to Berlin with Anthony Eden a few months earlier, shortly after the announcement of universal conscription, during which Hitler had declared his willingness to conclude an agreement on arms limitation, including in the area of the navy. Hitler, in any case, was so enthusiastic about the course of events in the summer of 1935 that he already considered the current foreign policy goals to have been achieved through military equality with Was-

---

[55]According to *Raeder·Henderson* responded with the vague reference to colonies that was customary in British rhetoric at the time: "I asked him how Great Britain would show its gratitude for Germany's generous concession on the question of the balance of power between the fleets, as our far-reaching offer had apparently been taken for granted up to that point. The ambassador replied seriously that this was by no means the case and that the British attitude would still be reflected in the settlement of the colonial problem." Quoted from *Raeder,* Mein Leben, p. 25.

[56] *Hitler's* wording during the war. Quoted from *Hewel*, Diary, September 8, 1941.

at sea and on land at that time as essentially achieved. The rest would "perhaps" come about in the longer term, on the basis of an
"eternal alliance" with England and "good relations" with Poland:

> "Führer is happy. Gives an outline of his foreign policy plans: eternal alliance with England. Good relations with Poland. Colonies to a limited extent. On the other hand, expansion to the east. The Baltic states belong to us. Control of the Baltic Sea. Conflicts between Italy and Abyssinia, then Japan and Russia on our doorstep. That means in a few years, perhaps. Then our historic moment will come. We must be ready."[57]

In the summer of 1935, the German state had reached a relatively comfortable position compared to 1933, with the naval agreement appearing to promise a lasting German-British alliance. According to Hitler's plans for the future developed on that day, this was not intended to give free rein to any fixed fantasies of conquest, but rather to provide the option of exploiting any international wars and tensions to expand German power. This had only a little to do with the constellations that ultimately came about. The Italian-British tensions over Ethiopia were discreetly encouraged by the German side with arms deliveries to Great Britain and promises of aid to Italy, which at least made a joint Italian-British policy on the Austrian question less likely. Hitler's statements were otherwise an expression of wishful thinking that Ribbentrop's foreign policy was unable to realize. Neither a good relationship with Poland nor an alliance with England came about. The Soviet-Japanese war that actually broke out was fought by the Soviets in 1939 briefly, energetically, and successfully, in order to neutralize Japan with an armistice and a non-aggression pact, which they broke on their own initiative only when Hitler's government was already history. Hitler's statements, however, are proof that the National Socialists did not plan to start a major war on their own initiative. They understood war as one of the phenomena with which world politics had always been conducted and would continue to be conducted. They assumed that they could derive their own advantage from such crises. They did not have any "step-by-step plans for world conquest" in their drawers.

---

[57] *Hitler* in conversation with *Goebbels*, quoted in *Goebbels*, Tagebücher, I, 3/I, p. 279, August 19, 1935.

3. How to invite a prime minister—and fail ( )

> Wilhelm II's unfortunate love for England was followed by Adolf Hitler's. Both would have given the world to be regarded as socially equal by this discreet nation. But England could not resist making the candidates for gentlemanliness feel haughty, that the attitude of a gentleman cannot be acquired by any means. That was an expensive joke, and the world will be busy paying for it for a long time to come."
>
> Friedrich Sieburg[58]

Since 1933, Ribbentrop had been trying to advance his policy through personal talks. This had been partially successful. However, Hitler had not yet established personal contacts with any Western heads of government or foreign ministers. All those approached had so far declined. Ribbentrop therefore intensified his efforts in 1936 to arrange a meeting between Hitler and the current British prime minister. As a contact person in the case of the current Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, he relied on one of those individuals within the British leadership who, although not holding office, were tacitly involved in pulling the strings. Ribbentrop chose Thomas Jones,([59])whom he contacted via Karlfried Graf Dürckheim,([60])a former university lecturer and Freikorps fighter who was then working for Ribbentrop's office.Dürckheim had already been involved in arranging a meeting between the English newspaper publisher Lord Beaverbrook and Hitler in 1935. Now he invited Jones to Ribbentrop's home in Berlin for what was initially intended to be a purely private meeting. Jones admitted that he occasionally had Prime Minister Baldwin's ear and was friends with him.

---

[58] Quoted in *Sieburg*, Untergang, p. 27.

[59] *Thomas Jones* (1870–1955), Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet under four British prime ministers (*Lloyd George*, *Bonar Law*, *Baldwin*, and *MacDonald*), was mockingly referred to as the "King of Wales" and occasionally ranked as "one of the six most important men in Europe." Beyond his term in office, he had a close friendship with *David Lloyd George* and families such as the Astors. He was also active in the field of education, serving as president of the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. During World War II, he worked for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, providing psychological support to British troops. He was a member of the Order of the Companion of Honour, established in 1917 by *George V*, which comprises a maximum of 45 British members who have made outstanding achievements in fields such as the arts, politics, science, or business.

[60] *Karlfried Graf Dürckheim* (1896–1988), professor of psychology in Breslau and Berlin until 1933, ended his university career despite signing the "Professors' Declaration of Allegiance to Adolf Hitler at German Universities and Colleges," probably also because of his ancestry, and moved to *Ribbentrop's* office. *Dürckheim* mockingly referred to himself as a "politically unacceptable quarter-Jew," but *Ribbentrop* was able to keep him in the Foreign Office until the end of the war, most recently in Japan. He was awarded the War Merit Cross II. Class.

[61] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 194, May 11, 1936.

He had also apparently indirectly encouraged Ribbentrop on a previous occasion to make further contact, commenting that Baldwin would inform him. Ribbentrop was unable to deduce from subsequent events how intensively these contacts were actually discussed on the British side. In his memoirs, he therefore mentions Jones only briefly as "Baldwin's friend," who ultimately conveyed a rejection because Baldwin did not know "how to talk to dictators."[62] It seems, however, that Ribbentrop came quite close to achieving his goals in the summer of 1936, even though Baldwin had already taken a stand against such attempts at contact with his remarks about the British border lying on the Rhine. [63] Nevertheless, an informal German-English alliance could even be considered a done deal at times.

Jones saw Ribbentrop as Hitler's special or "super ambassador" and knew that Ribbentrop's villa, to which he had now been invited by Dürckheim, had served as the meeting place in January 1933 where decisive negotiations on the National Socialist takeover had taken place.[64] Ribbentrop got straight to the point in Dahlem, which, in addition to promoting a meeting between Hitler and Baldwin, consisted primarily of the urgent reminder that he could not speak appropriately with a man like Ambassador Phipps. He accompanied this statement with general disrespectful remarks about German and British diplomats, for which he felt he had some reason.[65] When it came to German foreign policy, only Hitler—and Ribbentrop's advice—counted, not the General Staff and not the Junker class, whose influence Jones inquired about. Thus prepared, Jones met with Hitler himself the following day in the presence of Ribbentrop and made the observation shared by many English guests of the German Reich Chancellor in those months: the national revolutionary-style head of state appeared cheerful and calm.

---

[62] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 67 f.. This phase of *Ribbentrop's* policy toward England has also been largely ignored by researchers, although it was probably a major factor in his hopes of being appointed ambassador to London. *Wolfgang Michalka* mentions it in a few places, in the context of Ribbentrop's policy toward Spain and his anti-communism, without going into detail about the fundamental German-English aspects. See *Michalka,* Ribbentrop, p. 114 ff. *Michael Bloch* goes into somewhat more detail, but does not address the broader political aspects and the internal British or transatlantic debates. See *Bloch,* Ribbentrop, p. 100 ff.

[63] During *Ribbentrop's* attempts to establish contact in Paris, Minister of War *Duff Cooper* recalled this statement *by Baldwin* and bluntly celebrated France and England as parts of a civilized community of destiny against unspecified "barbarians" beyond it. See PA AA, London 1594, *Cooper's* speech of June 25, 1936.

[64] Intrigued by the question of what kind of English-language literature a "super ambassador" might read, he made fairly detailed notes on the contents of *Ribbentrop's* bookcase. See *Jones*, Diary, p. 196 f., May 16, 1936.

[65] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 197, May 16, 1936.

himself and, above all, made no attempt to impress his conversation partner in an aggressive or charismatic manner.[66]

To dampen overly high expectations, Jones pointed out that, although he had successfully attempted to dissuade the French government from entering the Ruhr region in January 1923 in the presence of Prime Minister Bonar Law, he had been a private citizen without any public role for several years. Nevertheless, he conveyed the message that, alongside the enthronement of the young king and the work of the Conservative Party, reconciliation with Germany was one of three political projects to which Baldwin attached particular importance – and thus the only one mentioned and therefore the primary goal of current British foreign policy from the head of government's point of view. At the same time, however, Jones urged a response to the British questionnaire that had been presented in the spring after the occupation of the Rhineland and inquired about the German government's views on the validity of the Treaty of Versailles and the current political status quo in Europe.[67]Hitler responded evasively to the questionnaire, but at the same time did not rule out a German return to the League of Nations, although he wanted it to be understood as a consultative body in the future. The most important thing, he said, was the German-British alliance and his personal meeting with Baldwin.

Jones conveyed the message to Baldwin and pushed the prime minister a little further forward. Baldwin generally refused to fly or use a ship, but he did not rule out a meeting with Hitler, who would arrive by plane, at the English head of government's country estate in Chequers on some inconspicuous day in August 1936. However, despite such announcements, Baldwin was not expected to take any initiative of his own, as the Prime Minister was too uncertain. So Jones took up his pen and answered Baldwin's question
"What are we to do?" as follows:

> "1) It is a mistake to underestimate Ribbentrop's influence and write him off because he does not adhere to orthodox procedures. He is at least a reliable telephone link to Hitler, and probably much more.

---

[66] Cf. *Jones*, Diary, p. 199, May 17, 1936. In the same vein, *Leopold Amery* wrote in 1935: "I found neither the hypnotic charm I had heard about nor any attempt to use it, but I liked his directness and his eagerness to explain his thoughts fully to his interlocutor." Quoted from *Amery,* Diaries, p. 397, entry dated August 13, 1935. The meeting was accompanied by *Dr. Paul Schmidt* as translator, who only took notes, however, as the conversation took place in German.

[67]The publishers of the Jones Diaries mention in a footnote that these questions were never answered. See *Jones*, Diary, p. 195. In fact, *Hitler* finally declared Germany's signature on the Treaty of Versailles null and void in his speech on the seizure of power on January 30, 1937, after receiving *Ribbentrop's* draft response for a meeting with *Stanley Baldwin* in mid-June, as *Ribbentrop* soon informed *Jones*, and then withholding the paper for months. See *Jones,* Diary, p. 224, June 16, 1936.

2) If it is our policy to accommodate Germany, then Phipps should be transferred the sooner the better. He should be replaced by someone like D'Abernon or Willington, uninhibited by diplomatic tradition, naturally equipped with knowledge of German, and capable of responding positively to Hitler's aspirations.

3) Hitler believes in you and believes that you alone can bring about the change in relations between England, France, and Germany that he desires. He wants to tell you this man to man. This secret visit should be arranged without too much delay, and shortly thereafter a communiqué should be issued announcing that it has taken place. Halifax's visit and the appointment of a successor to Phipps should take place immediately afterwards, the details of the new 'alliance' should be worked out, and its relations with the League of Nations, in its present or a reformed form, should be clarified.

4) Ribbentrop seemed far more passionate about the fate of "German flesh and blood" in Czechoslovakia than about any other issue. He spoke with particular hostility about Benesch. Is there anything that can be done diplomatically about this alleged persecution of Germans?

5) R. was convinced that Austria would not present an insurmountable difficulty if matters with Italy were settled. "We have no fundamental differences with Italy."

6) We should not burden ourselves with attempts to protect Austria from falling into Germany's lap. We will do no more for Austria than we do for Ethiopia. Under no circumstances will we support any sanctions against Germany under the banner of 'collective security'. Has this been made crystal clear to France?"[69]

Ribbentrop's unconventional diplomacy had thus penetrated the core area of British foreign policy formulation and had a positive impact there. It was somewhat unusual for British diplomacy toward Germany to engage in such behind-the-scenes methods, which were otherwise mainly used to shape opinion among the English elite and occasionally in relations with countries such as France and the United States. Ribbentrop had opened doors here that had previously been closed to German diplomacy, even in the Weimar era.

In a letter dated the same day, Jones explained his strategy to Abraham Flexner[70] Director of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton.

---

[68] After his replacement, foreign journalists in Berlin said that "*Phipps* was a victim of Mr. *von Ribbentrop*. ... However, *Sir Eric Phipps'* successor, *Henderson*, would be a disappointment for Mr. *von Ribbentrop* and also for the Foreign Office. The incoming British ambassador was a remarkably hard-nosed and thick-skinned fellow who also possessed the necessary amount of insolence to assert himself in Berlin." See R 27090, p. 28753, DR report of February 10, 1937.

[69] Quoted from *Jones*, Diary, p. 208, May 23, 1936.

[70] *Abraham Flexner* (1866–1959), American education policy maker.

As director of a think tank that brought together German-Jewish emigrants, mathematicians, and physicists such as Albert Einstein and John von Neumann, as well as emigrated German art historians such as Erwin Panofsky, Flexner played a role at the intersection of science and politics in the US that was not entirely dissimilar to that of Jones in Britain. At the beginning of the 1930s, Flexner's attempts to recruit Einstein and others to conduct research in the United States for comparatively astronomical salaries had initially failed. When the anti-Jewish reorientation of German domestic policy made their position impossible after January 1933, the scientists followed his call. His position enabled Flexner to pass on the assessment of the situation conveyed by Jones from England to the relevant authorities. In Jones's view, a decision was imminent. Not least, France's behavior toward Ethiopia and its alliance policy with Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union ultimately forced Britain to make a difficult choice, in his estimation:

> "We must choose between Russia and Germany, and quickly. If we do not, Germany and Italy will soon grow closer; apart from Austria, they have no differences. Hitler does not feel able to take on Russia alone and is frightened by the united Russian-Czechoslovakian policy in the air sector. He therefore wants an alliance with us to create a bulwark against the spread of communism."([71])

Jones had thus accurately reflected Ribbentrop's account and the German dictator's true thoughts, as expressed in his "Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan" formulated a few weeks later: Russian armament was growing at a rapid pace, so it was necessary to arm ourselves in defense against it, regardless of economic losses and with the goal of being ready for war after four years, according to his line of thinking. Other reports on Soviet tactics in Spain and Mongolia had confirmed Jones's similar assessment of the impact of communist propaganda, independent of the German accounts. ([72])The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War on July 18, 1936, less than two months later, reinforced this impression. Based on the scenario just outlined, Baldwin was prepared to enter into a certain alliance with Germany, to regard this as the last project of his term in office, and to resign in favor of Neville Chamberlain after the alliance was concluded, Jones wrote to Flexner. However the critics of such a move were a "formidable group": namely Neville Chamberlain's brother Austen, Winston Churchill, Robert Horne, and Earl Winterton.

---

[71] Quoted in *Jones*, Diary, p. 209, May 23, 1936.

[72] A conversation with the American ambassador in Moscow, *William Bullitt*, also confirmed this impression. See *Jones*, Diary, p. 210, May 25, 1936.

[73] Quoted from *Jones*, Diary, p. 209, May 23, 1936.

This essentially set the agenda for Ribbentrop's upcoming term as ambassador: it included anti-communism, which he publicly propagated in London and, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, also brought up in the specially founded international "Non-Intervention Committee." Above all, it included the attempt to establish a German-English alliance in the last year of Baldwin's time as head of government. Since the British prime minister himself was open to such ideas, this could hardly be considered hopeless, despite what was said later. On the contrary, Baldwin seemed to have already made a positive decision at times. However, it was not yet foreseeable that Ribbentrop would have to take further steps in this direction as an official ambassador. Shortly before Jones wrote these lines, the German ambassador in London, Leopold von Hoesch, had died. His unexpected death left the post vacant, which Ribbentrop finally decided to take over in August 1936.

The next step on the road to German-English reconciliation was to be Hitler's meeting with Baldwin in May 1936. Until then, all of Ribbentrop's attempts and all of Hitler's declarations of willingness to meet with a Western head of government had failed. As is well known, this attempt was also doomed to failure. Hitler would once again stand at the door and, in the spring of 1945, still grumble that Neville Chamberlain had flown to meet him in 1938, a mere "upstart" like himself, because he already knew that England's declaration of war was inevitable and was playing for time.[75]Jones had already distanced himself from his own proposal to receive the Germans by plane at one of the British Prime Minister's private residences when he met Ribbentrop at noon on June 2, 1936, after a stopover in the United States[76], to discuss such details. He couched this in polite terms, saying that one could not expect Hitler to fly to England, but that Baldwin was unwilling to fly on principle. Without wasting any time, Ribbentrop now offered a meeting three miles off the English coast. He could arrange for Hitler to travel there. Jones did not object, and the further discussions between him and Ribbentrop that day, which were joined at times by Thomas Inskip and Lothian and lasted until after midnight, apparently resulted in agreement on this point, even though Ribbentrop was clearly more enthusiastic about such an alliance than his interlocutors. Lothian emphasized to Ribbentrop the necessity of treaty amendments.

---

[74] Almost exactly one year after *Jones* wrote his letter, *Neville Chamberlain* took office on May 28, 1937.

[75] See *Trevor-Roper*, Diktate, p. 99, Hitler's statement of February 21, 1945.

[76] There he met political scientist *Lindsay Rogers* (1891–1970) from Columbia University, who then accompanied him to England as a representative of a working group newly appointed by President *Roosevelt*. See *Jones*, Diary, p. 216, June 2, 1936.

changes in "Austria, Memel, and the rest" could only be made in a way that did not make England appear to be breaking its word. It therefore seemed clear that such treaty amendments were possible.[77]

A few days later, everything was up in the air again. Baldwin had spoken with Foreign Secretary Eden and, although he was still willing to meet with Hitler, he had suddenly overcome his fear of flying and seasickness. He now wanted to travel to Berlin with Eden, and this was to take place in full public view, in contrast to the previously planned secret meeting in a small circle. This was obviously a pretext. So the days passed with discussions. What should have taken place immediately became increasingly problematic, and the response to Hitler was not made any easier to formulate. On June 16, Ribbentrop inquired about the status of the matter, as Hitler was slowly beginning to get the impression that the British were just playing games with him. ([78])A meeting convened at Jones' request between Jones, Horace Wilson, Anthony Eden, and Baldwin on the same day again yielded only a negative result. Eden now categorically opposed a meeting between Hitler and Baldwin, and Jones had no choice but to ask Ribbentrop to hold a personal discussion with Eden in order to overcome this resistance. This represented a significant setback in the efforts and indirectly implied an admission that the current British Prime Minister was unable to prevail over the Foreign Minister.[79] Jones' enthusiasm for the line discussed with Ribbentrop also clearly suffered from the experiences that had since been made within Britain. The list of principled opponents of a German-English consultation alliance was long. Jones maintained regular contact with them as well, with Chaim Weizmann as well as with Blanche Dugdale, Kingsley Martin, Henry Strakosch[80] and Wickham Steed, i.e., the co-organizers and main organizers of "Focus," Winston Churchill's support front, which finally began to take on an organized form in 1936. However, Jones was well aware that Churchill advocated and, in some cases, preached war against Germany on a daily basis.[81]

Since Ribbentrop was unlikely to succeed in persuading Anthony Eden to change his position, Baldwin took several months' vacation, and Jones seized the opportunity to visit the al-

---

[77] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 216, June 2, 1936.

[78] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 224, June 16, 1936.

[79] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 224, letter from *Jones* to *Ribbentrop* dated June 18, 1936.

[80] Banker *Strakosch* also saved *Churchill* from personal bankruptcy after his speculative losses on the stock market in the spring of 1938. With regard to foreign policy toward Germany, he anticipated the imminent collapse of the German financial system, as he informed Jones in the fall of 1936. See *Jones,* Diary, p. 277, October 21, 1936.

[81] "To come back to politicians once again. You will not be surprised to hear that *Winston* wants war immediately – the sooner the better, he thinks." *Thomas Jones* in a letter to *Lady Grigg* dated October 17, 1937, quoted in *Jones*, Diary, p. 368.

David Lloyd George on his trip to Germany, arranged by Ribbentrop through his long-standing contact Conwell-Evans. So although no current British head of government came to Germany, at least a former one did. It was, in a sense, the high point of this phase of German-British relations, with historical reflections and renewed mutual assurances of mutual appreciation, including between Lloyd George and Hitler in the presence of Jones and Ribbentrop. Once again, nothing concrete came of it. After one of these meetings, however, Thomas Jones at least took the opportunity to speak alone with Ribbentrop and Hitler and essentially offered Baldwin's poor health as an explanation for the failure of the talks.

But even after Baldwin's "recovery" nothing changed. Instead,Jones received a warning letter from the US, which did not give cause for further optimism in his contacts with Ribbentrop. His correspondent Flexner announced the military destruction of Nazi Germany on principle and on the basis of information obtained by his institute in Germany. Even people who were not themselves persecuted by the Nazis – and by no means only Jews – had gained the impression that they were living in a prison. The impression of June 30, 1934 had not faded. "Blood will have blood," it was only a matter of time:

> Ribbentrop may be a nice fellow, but the real elements that must determine England's foreign policy are surely two factors: (1) England must retain control of the Mediterranean region; (2) England cannot tolerate any damage to Belgium or France that would give Germany access to the Channel ports. All that Hitler has ultimately achieved so far is to promote a combination of Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, Russia, and England, the same combination that existed before 1914. What's more, he has made enemies of world public opinion, and it will take much less effort to draw the US into a war against him than was the case in the World War."([84])

These were prophecies that Flexner's "think tank," the IAS, later played a significant role in bringing to fruition.[85]Flexner obtained the information for such analyses both firsthand, from background discussions with the US leadership elite, and from reading the "public opinion" in the form of the New York Times. There was no mention of the fact that Russia or the USSR was a mass-murdering dictatorship with offensive

---

[82] *Jones's* account of the meeting *between Lloyd George and Hitler* on September 5, 1936, in Berchtesgaden, cf. *Jones*, Diary, p. 251.

[83]*Baldwin* told Jones on November 25, 1936, that a meeting with *Hitler* was "not out of the question." See *Jones*, Diary, p. 289.

[84]*Flexner* to *Jones*, November 5, 1936, quoted in *Jones*, Diary, p. 283.

[85] The design and development of nuclear weapons in particular was led by IAS staff. Ultimately, *John von Neumann's* group also selected the possible targets for the bombs. See *Macrae*, Facets, p. 212 ff.

intentions, nor was there any report of a complete lack of evidence of German intentions to expand into France or Belgium. The organization of American public opinion received a strong boost in October 1937 with a trip by Wickham Steed, a long-time British agent and senior Focus member who had been active since before World War I.[86]However, it had already cultivated an image of Nazi Germany as the enemy. In this respect, Flexner's letter to Jones served as a mood report that may have made him cautious. It is difficult to pursue politics against a combination of self-proclaimed ignorance and deliberate disinformation.

After touring the opinion and decision-making centers of the East Coast, his domestic political ally Lord Astor informed Jones that the level of information in the US was characterized by "anti-German propaganda from Jews and Communists." He had therefore only been able to argue cautiously in favor of a "settlement" with the dictatorships, which had met with a positive response. Under the circumstances, however, he had been unable to change the overall impression that this would be seen as a kind of capitulation to dictatorship due to fascist influences in England itself. ([87] Under such impressions, even an informal German-British conversation at the government level could be denounced as an expression of British weakness, as would later happen after the Munich Conference. Ribbentrop therefore did not succeed in enabling Hitler to travel to Great Britain. However, he did not give up, as chance gave him the opportunity to continue working in the diplomatic field in London as German ambassador.

By accepting this ambassadorial post, JvR also made a definitive decision to take on the role of public figure. As Commissioner for Disarmament Questions

---

[86]*Steed* met with prominent politicians in both Canada and the US, including Secretary of State *Cordell Hull* and President *Franklin Roosevelt* himself. His interlocutors also included numerous representatives from business and society. Among them were *Stephen Wise,* the leader of Zionism in the US, and *Bernard Baruch,* an old acquaintance *of Steed's* from the days of the Versailles peace negotiations and, for *Steed*, who had previously been strongly anti-Semitic, "the most influential Jew in America." *Arthur Hays Sulzberger,* owner of the New York Times, *John Finlay,* its editor, *John Neville Wheeler,* founder and president of the North American Newspaper Alliance, *Roy Howard,* president of the Scripps-Howard newspaper group, *Edwin James,* another representative of the New York Times, and *Arthur Krock,* also part of the New York Times dynasty, as well as *Felix Warburg* rounded off the circle of influential journalists with whom Steed held both individual meetings and conferences. On this occasion, when the heavyweights of the American press discussed the general orientation of their newspapers, the foundation stone was laid for the establishment of an American "Anti-Nazi Council," which soon became a reality under the leadership of *Clark M. Eichelberger,* director of the American League of Nations Association. See *Steed,* Notes on American Visit, in: CHAR 2/311 B, and *Scheil,* Gegner, Chapter VI, B, Wickham Steed in America.

[87] See *Jones*, Diary, p. 390, March 1938.

As a political advisor and general political consultant, he had previously worked mainly behind the scenes of the public eye. The negotiations he led after the occupation of the Rhineland in the spring of 1936 had already brought him to the attention of the world public in a different way than before. Soon after taking up his post as ambassador, he also became involved in the Non-Intervention Committee for the Spanish Civil War, which was also based in London. Since all the countries involved were in fact directly or indirectly interfering in this civil war and the European public was very agitated by it, the Non-Intervention Committee became a cynical and much-observed affair. Ribbentrop became a closely watched figure. He was clearly aware of the risks involved. Accept[ing] the offered position of State Secretary would have meant a quieter, but not necessarily less influential, political position.

[88]*Martin Bormann* was the prime example of such a role within the regime. Working anonymously, *Bormann* ultimately controlled access to the dictator and apparently refused to be appointed titular minister himself for fear of greater publicity. This is reported by *Paul Schmidt*, citing information from *Heinrich Lammers*, the head of the Reich Chancellery. See *Schmidt,* Diary, August 19, 1946.

IV. Decision in London

1. From Hoesch to Ribbentrop

> "From Berlin's perspective, Mr. von Ribbentrop's task is by no means easy. He is neither a career diplomat nor a member of the 'old guard' of the Nazi party, and therefore has few friends among Hitler's confidants.
>
> The fact that the German press published the British criticism of his London attack on Bolshevism in unusual detail and without comment caused astonishment in diplomatic circles here."
>
> Report from the Daily Telegraph, November 1936[1]

The year 1939 was to produce an extraordinary American comedy film. Ernst Lubitsch presented Greta Garbo in Ninotchka as a Soviet communist who was sent on a mission to the West, where she involuntarily discovered laughter and love, eventually deciding to remain in the West. Upon her arrival in Paris, however, she first gets off the train and explains to the comrades from the Soviet embassy waiting there that things in Moscow are going very well: after the recent purges, there are now a few thousand fewer Russians, but they are better Russians. This was unusual, as was the entire film, because it was the first American feature film in which the Stalinist USSR was hinted at as an overly serious and even deadly enterprise – in the form of a comedy with a mild ending and overly obvious pro-socialist undertones. The millions of victims of Stalin's policies who had already died by that time were otherwise virtually ignored by American films, which – whether openly or subtly politically oriented – preferred to focus on the dangers of National Socialism.

When Ribbentrop got off the train in London in 1936 to take up his new post, he told the international press waiting there that, as the new ambassador, he would strive for a German-English defensive alliance against the very communism that could be seen in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Promptly

---

[1] Article by the Berlin correspondent of the Daily Telegraph on November 5, 1936, entitled: "Ribbentrop's position complicated by the behavior of the Nazis," quoted here from PA AA, London 1594.

[2] A drastic but factually correct statement such as that made by *Timothy Snyder*, according to which "the Soviet Union was the only country in Europe in the 1930s that carried out mass political murders," was still unusual and sensational in 2011. See *Snyder*, Bloodlands, p. 12.

This was widely presented in the British media as an undiplomatic scandal. It was reported that the British public and politicians were not prepared to make public statements against any country with which they maintained normal relations, including the USSR. This reaction to Ribbentrop's opening address already revealed all the problems he would face in Britain over the next year and a half. While Germany's leadership perceived the USSR as a deadly threat, as Hitler had described it in his memorandum on the Four-Year Plan just a few weeks earlier, London regarded it more as a whimsical and obscure project. British society and politicians maintained cordial relations with the representatives of this project who had been cleverly selected with an eye to the West, such as Foreign Minister Litvinov and Ambassador Maisky. Although the USSR in 1936, when Ribbentrop arrived, was a murderous totalitarian state unlike any the world had seen before, this found almost no resonance in London, socially, culturally, or politically. The young King Edward VIII was an exception, occasionally expressing fears that the communists might bring about the same deadly end for him as for his relative, the Russian tsar.[3] The king also spoke out strongly in favor of Ribbentrop as the new ambassador, whom he personally preferred to the incumbent Hoesch. Hoesch was "as diligent as he was oily," said Edward VIII. With Ribbentrop, on the other hand, there would be a National Socialist in London whose demeanor "identified him as a natural part of the gentry."(4)

Before 1945, Britain failed to raise awareness of Soviet communism as a threat. Even when attempts were made in this direction in Parliament, they were successfully dismissed as irony. This was the case, for example, when various members of Parliament asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Viscount Cranborne, why the British government was lending money to the Soviet government when it was well known that the Communist International was controlled and financed from Moscow. Cranborne responded by simply confirming these facts and stating that there was nothing that could be done about it. Finally, Communist MP William Gallacher successfully ridiculed the matter, to the general laughter of the House:

> "Is the noble Lord (meaning Cranborne, author's note) not aware that it is an insult to a friendly government to claim that it is financing the Communist International? And is he not further aware that even if a wall were built to prevent all contact between England and Russia, I would continue my revolutionary activities?"[5]

The widespread opposing views on the subject of communism are also reflected in the downright adventurous remarks in a

---

[3] Cf. *Cave Brown*, Servant, p. 182.

[4] Cf. ibid. *Cave Brown*, Servant, p. 182.

[5] Dialog reported in The Times, February 16, 1937, quoted here from PA AA, London 1594.

Memorandum from Anthony Eden's private secretary Oliver Harvey: "As long as Britain, France, and the Soviets are strong and united in the defense of democracy (sic) and small nations, with America as a benevolent supporter in the background, these small nations will be on our side."[6] At precisely this time, in 1937, seven hundred thousand people were shot in the USSR as part of the Great Terror,[7] which was a memorable contribution to the "defense of democracy." Ribbentrop's appeal to such facts fell on deaf ears, as neither England nor the US wanted to know about it. "Blood will have blood," as Adam Flexner had put it, was not a universal law.

In any case, JvR's first appearance already indicated that he was pushing for a quick decision. Germany did not believe it had much time left. Following the now openly declared rearmament, further territorial revision goals and the establishment of an international position for Germany as an equal power accepted by the European states had to follow quickly. Ribbentrop had been commissioned and had come to London for this purpose to conclude a German-English alliance on equal terms. The emphasis was on the latter. Nazi Germany offered itself as a British partner, but Ribbentrop wanted to make it clear at all times, in both style and substance, that this partnership would come at a price that was appropriate for Great Britain, but also appropriately expensive. Against this backdrop, the much-lamented "unrest" surrounding his activities in London was a calculated side effect.

One of the first steps in this direction was, for example, the complete renovation of the German embassy building, which Hitler personally ordered. What was already an imposing building was transformed into a representative structure designed by Albert Speer in the neoclassical National Socialist style. Built by German craftsmen using German building materials to save foreign currency, it was designed in every respect to be recognizable as the seat of a power that was on an equal footing with Great Britain as an existential and exclusive ally. Here political intentions were expressed in an architecture that was also intended to provide an unusually large setting for the receptions hosted by Ribbentrop for London society. The completion date was set for the planned coronation of Edward VIII in May 1937.

This represented a significant break with the habits of his predecessor in the ambassadorial post, whose sudden death made Ribbentrop's mission in this form possible and necessary in the first place. Otherwise, Leopold von Hoesch would most likely have remained the German diplomatic representative at the Court of St. James, despite the royal desire for change.

---

6 Quoted in *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 405, memorandum of March 7, 1937.

7 Cf. *Snyder*, Bloodlands, p. 9.

8 Cf. *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 117.

wishes. In any case, there were no signs that he intended to step down, although Hoesch, as a quiet and distinguished diplomat, embodied the continuity of Nazi foreign policy with the Weimar period, during which he had moved from Paris to the London embassy in 1932, succeeding Konstantin von Neurath, who had been promoted to foreign minister and still held this post in 1936. Hoesch had calmly accepted the minor and major humiliations to which German diplomats were subjected by their British colleagues. Even Nevile Henderson, who was considered "pro-German," emphasized in his memoirs that he had once treated Hoesch condescendingly and insulted him in Paris, even though he was considerably lower in rank at the time. It was apparently considered good English form to at least attribute such behavior to oneself if one wanted to be taken seriously. Hoesch hardly reacted to this, but this incident, like many others, may have contributed to his extremely cautious attitude toward British politics.

In his memoirs, JvR reports that he got on quite well with his predecessor Hoesch and that he had spoken with him on various occasions during his stays in London. He had to assume that he was talking to the diplomat who was decisive for German-English relations in the 1930s and who would remain permanently in the London post. As mentioned above, no one in Berlin was thinking about replacing Hoesch. Assuming that Hoesch and Ribbentrop had indeed spoken, the question arises as to how Hoesch actually assessed the situation in England and what influence this view may have had on JvR's attitude.

First of all, when looking at the documents, it is striking that Hoesch was one of those German diplomats who openly opposed the Foreign Office's constant intrigues and disparagement of Ribbentrop. In response to a condescending letter from State Secretary Bülow, who claimed that Ribbentrop had perhaps "fallen for" an English maneuver during his talks with Anthony Eden and John Simon in May 1934 on the question of a non-aggression pact with Belgium and had "difficulty understanding the meaning and significance of Locarno,"([9])Hoesch replied quite clearly. In fact, Ribbentrop had probably elicited Simon's statement on the non-aggression pact against his will:

> Later, after categorically denying that he had hinted to Ribbentrop that he was willing to support a postponement of the disarmament issue, Simon admitted that he had mentioned the idea of a German-Belgian non-aggression pact in the conversation in question, but he was keen to portray the mention as purely coincidental. ... When you express the view in your letter that Simon simply passed on to Ribbentrop the wishes expressed here by Hysmanns for additional security guarantees, this is contradicted by the fact that

---

[9] Cf. ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 73, p. 143 f., letter from *Bülow* to *Hoesch* dated July 9, 1934.

Ribbentrop's visit ended on Saturday, May 12, while Hysmann did not pay his respects here until May 16 or 17."[10]

English diplomats were able to "deny" and German diplomats should check the calendar before making assumptions. Hoesch's irony, described by many, is well expressed here, which is quoted in more detail because it aptly illustrates the Foreign Office's unjustified bias against Ribbentrop's early diplomatic travels. A glance at the documents also reveals that Hoesch's views in 1936 coincided with Ribbentrop's later analyses. Against the backdrop of his experiences as ambassador in Paris and London, Hoesch, like JvR, was particularly open to a Franco-German reconciliation. As far as England was concerned, however, he did his best to dampen the expectations cherished in Berlin with regard to an Anglo-German alliance. In one of his last reports from London, he described, on the contrary, the increasing anti-German tendencies in Great Britain. It was not unlikely that London would find itself definitively in the camp of Germany's opponents within a year and, in that case, would become the main initiator of a renewed policy of encirclement. German policy would be making a mistake, he said, if it counted on British friendship.[11] This corresponded almost word for word to what Ribbentrop, based on his own experiences at the turn of 1937/38, was to say to Hitler in slightly stronger terms: it would be a mistake not to reckon with British hostility. If efforts to establish a partnership failed, any independent German power politics would have to reckon with England as a potentially decisive adversary, and every day would be lost if this adversary were not at least taken into account as a potentially existing fact.[12]The days of the "Crimean War situation" were over, when Russia and England, the two great European wing states, had remained neutral towards developments in Central Europe in the second half of the 19th century after the Crimean War of 1853–56. This had favored the outcome of the German wars of unification from 1864 to 1871 and the founding of the German Empire in 1871, if not made it possible in the first place. In the 1930s, both states, the USSR and Great Britain, were by no means neutral toward developments in Central Europe. Berlin's policy therefore had the choice between partnership or enmity with both states, unless it succeeded in developing enough strength of its own to enforce its neutrality.

Hoesch had the opportunity to experience England's readiness for war at close quarters. German embassy employee Fritz Hesse reports on a

---

[10] See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 94, p. 178 ff., letter from *Hoesch* to *Bülow* dated July 17, 1934.

[11] These statements had become known in England. *Phipps* to *Sargent* dated April 25, 1936 (FO 371/19904) and April 23, 1936 (FO 371/19904). Cf. *Michalka*, Ribbentrop, p. 211.

[12] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Vorgeschichte, p. 126.

event to which he had received an invitation. Also present was Wickham Steed, whom we already know as the organizer of political opposition to the Nazi state:

> "When I entered the hall a little late and took my seat, Mr. Steed was just saying, 'Last time we discussed the question of the German threat. Perhaps Mr. Churchill would be so kind as to repeat what he said then.
>
> Churchill, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his trouser pockets, rose and began to speak, at first indistinctly... then more clearly. 'Well,' he said, 'what I have to say can actually be repeated in a few words. If a mad dog goes at my trousers, I shoot him before he can bite!" Whereupon a general murmur of "Hear! Hear!" arose."([13])

Given this approval among the audience, Hesse said that nothing more or less than the question of a preventive war against Germany was discussed that evening. For the time being, this remained within the academic sphere, and according to Hesse, the opponents of war retained the majority for the time being. Nevertheless, it was important figures such as Winston Churchill, Wickham Steed, Robert Vansittart, and Archibald Sinclair who declared war on a Germany that was rising to power and made little secret of their intentions in the confidential atmosphere of these political circles. Hoesch only discovered Hesse's presence after the event had ended and implored him not to pass on any information about it to Germany, because the political damage would be immense. He himself only hinted at the danger of the English attitude towards Germany in his reports, warning against illusions of friendship.

Hoesch is consistently described in memoirs as an "old-school diplomat," educated, discreet, cautious, and a recognized member of the respective local high society. However, this seems to have been combined with a certain naivety, and this is also noted from time to time amid all the praise, for example by Geyr von Schweppenburg, who served as military attaché at the London embassy during Hoesch's time as ambassador. According to Schweppenburg, Hoesch "socialized intensively with the Duff Coopers," i.e., with the militant opponents of German power on the European continent.[14] In principle, this could have been a good idea, as it would have provided first-hand information about developments in this direction within England, possibly through events such as the one mentioned above, which brought together Wickham Steed, Winston Churchill, and Robert Vansittart, the spearheads of the anti-German movement in English politics. However, there are indications that Hoesch underestimated both the extent of the opposition and the methods used, despite his ultimately expressed fears. For example, the German embassy failed to notice that as early as

---

[13] Quoted from *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 39 f.
[14] Cf. *Schweppenburg*, Hoesch, p. 31.

"In 1934, under the guidance of Robert Vansittart, a rapprochement was initiated between the Soviet Russian ambassador Majsky and Churchill, followed by one between Majsky and the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook."(15)

The contacts made here improved in the following years and led to the important role that Ivan Maisky was to play in London, both politically and socially. Despite all the Soviet mass crimes, the USSR was therefore considered an accepted and predictable partner and was presented as such to the British public in the Beaverbrook press, with frequent references to the alleged military harmlessness of the Red Army as further reassurance. This stood in stark contrast to the danger posed by Germany, which was emphasized in the English press and politics at the time, and especially to the German government's simultaneous attempts to make the Western public aware of the threats posed by the USSR. However, traditional German diplomacy, as embodied by Hoesch, had little interest in these issues. During the funeral ceremonies for George V in 1936, political talks took place between Marshal Tukhachevsky, the head of the Soviet delegation, and English conservatives. Hoesch took note of this, but attached little importance to it. In this respect, the conservatives in the Foreign Office were not only unwilling to implement the policy urgently advocated by the head of state and party leader,(16)but also failed to recognize the objective foreign policy dangers that existed.

In the Hoesch case, this resulted, among other things, in a disregard for the omnipresent capabilities of the British secret service to intercept communications from the German embassy. When Geyr von Schweppenburg pointed out to him that there must be a leak through which the encrypted messages sent to Berlin were becoming known to the British secret service, Hoesch admitted that he had asked no one other than Duff Cooper about this point. Cooper had replied that they did not know the German code, and Hoesch apparently believed that this settled the matter. "Then the English certainly have the code," Geyr von Schweppenburg is said to have replied, apparently without arousing the ambassador's doubts about the code of honor of a politician like Duff Cooper. Later, Schweppenburg's view proved to be correct.[17] One of the differences between the National Socialist leadership in Germany and the conservative functional elites was their understanding of methods used by competing foreign countries that were still in place in Wilhelmine Germany.

---

[15] Quoted from *Schweppenburg*, Hoesch, p. 30. According to his own account, *Schweppenburg* himself only visited the French and—thanks to an exemption—the Soviet embassy and regularly read Izvestia, so he was actually responsible for clarifying these matters.

[16] It was at this very time that *Hitler* wrote his "Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan" and declared that repelling the coming Soviet attack was the benchmark for all political action.

[17] See *Schweppenburg*, Hoesch, p. 31 f.

Despite all the negative experiences, these times were unfamiliar to socialized German diplomatic personnel. During the First World War, the Foreign Office had not been concerned about using telegraph cables running through Great Britain for sensitive – and encrypted – diplomatic correspondence overseas, so that it could also be intercepted at that time. ([18])The situation in London was similar in the 1930s.

2.

> "The impossible will be expected of him, and if he fails to deliver what is desired, it will be used against him – vigorously and with 'Schadenfreude' (German in the original) among the party extremists who hate him."
>
> Robert Vansittart[19]

Ribbentrop's appointment as ambassador to London could have led to a fundamental decision on Anglo-German relations for several reasons. He had asked Hitler for the post[20] because he wanted to achieve something spectacular, which seemed achievable to him based on his previous experiences. He came with the mission of bringing about an Anglo-German alliance, and he came as a person who had the ear of the German head of state and dictator in foreign policy matters, which was common knowledge.[21] His appearance was

---

[18] One of the consequences was the notorious affair surrounding the telegram in which *Arthur Zimmermann*, State Secretary in the Foreign Office, attempted in January 1917 to interest Mexico in possibly entering the war against the USA. Following the British model of the time, he promised recognition of any conquests, which the British government was able to present to the world public and which probably influenced the American decision to enter the war. *Barbara Tuchman* was a particularly vehement proponent of this thesis. See *Tuchman,* Zimmermann, passim.

[19] *Vansittart's* notes on his visit to Germany in August 1936 and his assessment of *Ribbentrop's* situation, in: DBFP 2/XVII, Appendix I, p. 757 ff.

[20]This point was already a subject of controversy at the time, as JvR's opponents claimed that he had been sent to London against his will and had developed the often-rumored "hostility toward England" due to his disappointment with the new post, which was in fact more of a fear of English hostility. Confirmation of *Ribbentrop's* post-war account can be found in the wording of his ambassadorial report from the turn of the year 1937/38: "When I asked the Führer to send me to London," which he could hardly have claimed to *Hitler* if *Hitler* had sent him there against his will. On the question of whether *Ribbentrop* went to London voluntarily or not, see also the DR report of June 14, 1937. In it*, Friedrich Berber* explained to a Mr. *Klemmt that JvR* had been able to choose between the post of State Secretary in the Foreign Office and that of "extraordinary ambassador" in London the previous year. See R 27090, p. 28787, DR report of June 14, 1937.

[21]The argument of "exceptional circumstances" was occasionally emphasized by the Foreign Office, for example by Legation Councilor *Braun von Stumm*, who explained to a Berlin representative of the Reuters news agency that it was a special privilege to be in London "the Führer's advisor in the

and therefore as significant in terms of content as it was politically explosive. To thwart Ribbentrop's mission would also have to affect Hitler himself. Ribbentrop therefore posed a major challenge to the fundamental English opponents of a pro-German policy – regardless of their inner convictions – such as Robert Vansittart, Winston Churchill, and Wickham Steed. From their point of view, he had to be fought, not only politically, but preferably also personally. Truth was not traditionally a category in which they thought. Steed, for example, had been circulating forged documents since the First World War and up until August 1939, in which he spoke in virtually any form of German assassinations, plans of attack, plans of division, or even the planned use of poison gas.

Ribbentrop's appointment coincided with the start of the initiative that became known as "Focus," in which Wickham Steed, like Churchill, was to find a political platform. Focus was a loosely structured association of public figures, including politicians from the major parties, trade unionists, journalists, bishops, publishers, scientists, authors, and others. Its orientation encompassed Christian, liberal, Jewish, and conservative currents. The aim of this association was to combat pro-German, and in 1936 also pro-Nazi, attitudes in English politics and public life.

The illustrious Focus group held top positions in many aspects of public life. Prominent industrialists and financiers were represented, as were union leaders, influential journalists, bishops, free churches, and government officials. Among others, it included three Nobel Prize winners, appropriately one past and one future winner for peace (Normann Angell in 1933 and Robert Cecil in 1937, respectively) and one future winner for literature (Churchill in 1953), a former Conservative Party leader and brother of the pre-war prime minister (Austen Chamberlain), and three future prime ministers (Churchill, Attlee, Eden). Strictly speaking, from 1940 to 1957, no one else had access to the entirety of British foreign policy

---

entire German foreign policy at his disposal." See R 27090, p. 28725, report from the DR dated October 31, 1937, underlining in the original.

[22] See ADAP, C, III/1, Doc. 52, p. 109, July 3, 1934. Foreign Minister *Neurath* to the embassy in London regarding "*Wickham Steed's* publication, based on forged documents, about alleged German preparations for poison gas and bacterial attacks on London and Paris" in an article in the July issue of "The Nineteenth Century and After." Title: "Aerial Warfare: Secret German Plans."

[23] Cf. *Bavendamm*, Weg, p. 310. As far as journalism was concerned, Sir *Walter Layton* brought his influence at the News Chronicle, Star, Economist, Manchester Guardian, and Daily News to bear on Focus.

[24] On March 17, 1937, *A. H. Richards* wrote a satisfied letter to *Churchill* about the development and growing influence of Focus, announcing as new assets a representative of the Free Churches, *Sir Arthur Salter*, and *Sir Patrick Gower*. See CHAR 2/ 311 A.

head of government who had not belonged to this network, and since Harold Macmillan was also later won over to collaborate, this period continued to expand. The importance of this group and its political influence are therefore beyond question. [25]

Ribbentrop himself took note of this undertaking, but considered it a secondary phenomenon. As we have seen, he thought in terms of the expansion of state power and the standards of European equilibrium that were often emphasized in England itself. Under these circumstances, he wanted to attempt a reconciliation between Nazi Germany and England, which he believed was possible despite ideological differences, provided that England did not see the European balance of power being disrupted by Greater German revisionism. In his memoirs, written in Nuremberg prison, he devoted a few lines to this question, also focusing on the following point:

> "I see the third reason for the failure of a final German-English agreement in the 1930s in the strong influence of those circles in England that were hostile to National Socialist ideology from the outset, above all the Freemasons and Jews, but also certain ecclesiastical and trade union influences. The extent to which these circles, to which the indirect influences from the USA must be added, played a decisive role in developments is highly controversial. I myself believe that they were only of secondary importance compared to the decisive role played by circles with a purely imperial British outlook."([26])

In his final report as ambassador, he would later warn Hitler specifically about this imperial camp in England, which would wage war against Germany on principle because of its potential strength. Robert Vansittart, quoted at the beginning of this article, can undoubtedly be assigned to this group of Germany's principled opponents. From 1929 until the end of Ribbentrop's term as ambassador, he held the post of Permanent Under-Secretary of State in the British Foreign Office. Vansittart belonged to the "anti-German group" ([27])in the British Foreign Office associated with Eyre Crowe, which saw the mere existence of a united Germany and its population and economic growth as a phenomenon that was only compatible with British interests if it remained a secondary power. Germany's existence was to be welcomed because it would prevent French-Russian domination of the continent. Anything beyond that would be a bad thing. However, according to Crowe, its natural growth could bring about the day when Germany would make demands on England, especially since, in his opinion, the idea of "world power" was already strong in Germany.([28]) There were plenty of statements from German leaders

---

[25] Cf. *Scheil*, Gegner, p. 87 f.

[26] Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs,

[27] Cf. *Wipperfürth*, Imperialism, p. 234.

[28] Cf. text of the memorandum in: http://tmh.floonet.net/pdf/eyre_crowe_memo.pdf, here p. 405 f.

to pursue an offensive policy of this kind, but that this was ultimately of secondary importance. Ultimately, Crowe virtually called for war against Germany, as England would become a secondary power if it gave in to his demands. [29] Vansittart's thinking, which was also based on such views, cannot, however, be regarded as a purely
"imperial" nature. In his case, there was also an emotional prejudice against Germans, which soon after 1939 manifested itself in plans for extermination and eradication. For the time being, however, he merely informed Ribbentrop that the National Socialist ambitions for a Greater German unity would make Germany the dominant state in Europe: "And we will not allow them to do that."

As Vansittart correctly recognized in the above-quoted memo, Ribbentrop's appointment as ambassador to the Foreign Office had been received with little or, at best, mixed enthusiasm both in party circles and at the embassy. The Propaganda Ministry's liaison officer at the London embassy, Sigismund FitzRandolph, states that he ultimately advised Joseph Goebbels against Ribbentrop's appointment when asked about its possible implications. However, the mood at the London embassy and its surroundings was divided:

> Some believe that having Ribbentrop there will have a very positive effect. Since he is in such close contact with the Führer, it is assumed that it will prove useful to have an ambassador in London who is at the source of events in Berlin. I suspect that this view is held in official circles as well as in the circles of the German-English movement. The embassy is accused of being rather detached from the actual, new world of ideas in Berlin. Other people strongly reject Ribbentrop and his dispatch to London. It probably depends on which points of view are given primary importance. I myself know, for example, a young English lady who begged the Führer not to send Ribbentrop to London. She was reportedly sharply rebuffed."[30]

Even as ambassador in London, Ribbentrop remained dependent on maintaining close contact with Berlin in order to prevent his position—and that of his colleagues elsewhere[31]—from being undermined by internal regime intrigues

---

[29] Ibid. http://tmh.floonet.net/pdf/eyre_crowe_memo.pdf, p. 414.

[30] Quoted from *FitzRandolph*, London, p. 65. *FitzRandolph* emphasizes that he can remember this conversation and its wording precisely. The "young English lady" was probably *Unity Mitford*, with whom *FitzRandolph* was acquainted, the only Englishwoman who regularly met with Hitler in person. She was intensely committed to German-English relations and, after Britain declared war on September 3, 1939, she shot herself in the head. After the war ended, she died in 1945 from the long-term effects of this injury. See *Schädlich,* Mitford, passim.

[31] *Ribbentrop's* representative in France, *Otto Abetz*, had to face trial in 1937 for allegedly deviating from the Nazi party line, which his biographer *Ray* directly links to *Ribbentrop's* activities in London. See *Ray*, Abetz, p. 217 f.

see.[32] He tried to obtain information about the course of events there in various ways,[33] and also traveled to Germany frequently, so that he spent relatively little time in London for an ambassador.

Vansittart's seventeen-page account of his stay in Germany in 1936, quoted above, does not come from the files of the British Foreign Office, but from his private archive and was written for his own purposes.([34]) Vansittart noted with amused satisfaction that his introduction by name in Germany made a visible impression on his German interlocutors. From their point of view, they had, so to speak, the devil incarnate before them, who also knew how to express himself fluently in German. They remained polite to each other, but vague. Vansittart complained that Hitler, too, had stuck to general platitudes, but on the other hand reacted absently when someone tried to change this. Ribbentrop was the only one in Berlin who had "shown his teeth," namely when he once remarked that "if England did not give Germany the opportunity to live, war could even break out between the two countries and one of them would then be wiped out."([35])According to his notes, Vansittart did not ask what Ribbentrop meant by "opportunity to live" because he did not want to give the impression of negotiating. He succeeded completely. In his memoirs, Ribbentrop himself describes this conversation as if, despite all attempts at negotiation, Vansittart had only given the impression of a silent wall: "I have had conversations on this subject with hundreds of Englishmen in my life, but never has a conversation been so fruitless, so without any resonance, without the slightest response from my interlocutor to what mattered."[36] Both accounts therefore agree on this point.

Whether Ribbentrop actually mentioned the word "war," as Vansittart's notes claim, and, above all, in what manner, is difficult to reconstruct. The assertions made by Vansittart, Churchill, and other figures of this persuasion

---

[32] In any case, Ambassador *Ribbentrop* remained under the supervision of *Otto Bene,* whom the NSDAP had established as regional group leader and "supreme party representative" at the embassy in London and who, according to *Geyr von Schweppenburg,* "apart from his presumptuous attitude toward the ambassador, made it difficult for him to carry out his duties." See *Schweppenburg,* Hoesch, p. 36.

[33] In this context, *Ernest Tennant* states that *Ribbentrop* asked him for occasional reports from Berlin. He, too, had often advised *Ribbentrop* against accepting the post in London, but after *Hoesch's* sudden death, the temptation for *Ribbentrop* was probably too great. He asked *Hitler* for the post and got it. See *Tennant,* Account, p. 194.

[34] See *Vansittart's* notes on his visit to Germany in August 1936, in DBFP 2/XVII, Appendix I, p. 768.

[35] See *Vansittart's* notes on his visit to Germany in August 1936, in DBFP 2/XVII, Appendix I, here p. 768.

[36] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 96.

Several of Ribbentrop's statements are demonstrably inaccurate. In any case, the respective perception of the overall situation was decisive in classifying such an allusion. The assurance that "we want to conduct politics in such a way that we never again wage war against each other" can be interpreted as an attempt to defuse a delicate situation, or as a latent threat of war in a situation that is actually calm on both sides. Vansittart suggested that the latter might be possible, but on the other hand did not take it too seriously and did not address the Ribbentrop issue further in the remaining six pages of his notes after these few sentences. In a way, however, this failed dialogue hinted at the misunderstandings that were to characterize German-English relations in the years 1936–1939. Men like Robert Vansittart did not believe that there was anything existential to negotiate about Germany's "life situation," such as a policy of territorial revision or an alliance between the two countries on an equal footing. If a policy with such goals were nevertheless pursued, Vansittart saw this as a reason for war. Ribbentrop was soon able to report this back to Berlin.

His report, written in 1937 on the occasion of the coronation of the new English king, bore clear traces of such debates and devoted as much space to the psychological prerequisites of power politics as it did to the mechanics of European alliance systems and threat scenarios.[37]From the German point of view and from Ribbentrop's perspective, the danger of a two-front war was always the main problem. Hitler feared a major Soviet attack on Europe and Germany, while Ribbentrop was concerned that such an attack could even count on French and British support:

> "As things stand today, there is a danger that in the event of a Russian-German conflict, England will somehow be drawn into the war against Germany by France (there are plenty of ways to do this: false reports from Havas,[38] false claims of aggression, acts of sabotage, etc., etc.)."[(39)]

---

[37]*Roland Ray* refers to France as a "psychological strategy of the Ribbentrop office to win over the people." See *Ray*, Abetz, p. 168.

[38]There are plenty of examples of such disinformation. In June 1939, for example, the chief correspondent of the Havas agency in Berlin failed to persuade three different American journalists to publish the false report that *Hitler* would demand Danzig and the Corridor in a major speech in northern Germany on July 1, 1939. Havas did not want to publish this report itself this time, even though it originated from the French embassy. See PA AA 27092, p. 29477, report from Ribbentrop's office dated June 15, 1939. One day later, another report arrived about systematic attempts by British and French embassy circles to influence the "neutral" press. See PA AA 27092, p. 29479, report from Ribbentrop's office dated June 16, 1939. *Hitler* was presented with a report on a US journalist named *Sylvester Viereck,* who was traveling in Germany, was considered pro-German, and was critical of *President Roosevelt's* policies, which, in his opinion, Germany should ignore as much as possible until they had run their course. Shortly thereafter, he had a car accident that landed him in the hospital. See PA AA 27092, p. 29483 f., report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 20, 1939.

[39] Quoted from ADAP, C, VI/2, Doc. 380.

The countless false reports in the international press in recent years had clearly left their mark on Ribbentrop. Perhaps it really was possible to portray a war in Europe initiated or provoked by the USSR as a German war of aggression; in some respects, this is what ultimately happened in 1939. In this case, an Anglo-German treaty whose validity was limited to a Soviet war of aggression would not be sufficient. Ribbentrop concluded that an Anglo-German reinsurance treaty was the desirable countermeasure:

> "The only clear way to prevent this would be an unambiguous British assurance of neutrality in the event of a German-Russian war. This would, in all likelihood, secure us in the West, because without British military aid, France would hardly attack the German western fortifications."[40]

In this case, "unequivocal" meant that there could be no discussion or restrictions as to who had started the war in case of doubt. This would be difficult to communicate, as British diplomacy officially attached great importance to assigning blame. However, a similar treaty to the one Ribbentrop was hinting at here was ultimately concluded between Great Britain and Poland in 1939. At the time, this treaty was directed exclusively against Germany and promised British entry into the war in the event that Germany threatened Polish "independence," without specifying what such a threat would look like. In other words, the treaty established German guilt for the war from the outset, even if Poland were to launch a war of aggression against Germany. A British declaration of neutrality in the event of a Soviet threat to German independence would therefore have been possible and would have been in line with the approach taken in 1939. In principle, such a treaty structure could, from the British point of view, have provided the necessary security if it had absolutely guaranteed the status quo in Western Europe. However, such an absolute declaration of neutrality could possibly be misused to wage a war of aggression or simply to create a fait accompli. The French war of aggression against the German Confederation in 1870 had ultimately ended in Paris, and continued British neutrality had then enabled the founding of the German Empire there in 1871. Even in a German-Soviet war, regardless of its cause, there might be a clear winner, and that could have fatal consequences from the English point of view, as Ribbentrop had learned:

> However, as a very reliable confidant confirmed to me again today, the Foreign Office's argument remains as follows: if Germany were to emerge victorious from a war with Russia, it would be so powerful that it could do whatever it wanted with Europe and, one day, with England too. This argument, which is supported by...

---

[40] Quoted from ADAP, C, VI/2, Doc. 380.

> Germany's apparent striving for world domination and which fundamentally denies Germany's ability to live as a contented, saturated nation, we must refute it with all the means and arguments at our disposal ..." [41]

This call for confidence-building measures encapsulated the entire dilemma of German foreign policy in the years to come. If a revision of borders in line with the desired Greater German vision was necessary but not possible through negotiation, then unilateral action on the part of Germany would be required, which in turn could destroy any trust that had been built up, especially if it was presented to the international public in a certain way. The extent to which British-German relations were already symbolically strained, regardless of developments still to come, was evident elsewhere.

3. Questions of style in an imperial era

> "As we drove up, I was horrified to see a huge tricolor flying above the entrance. Blomberg apparently did not notice this somewhat peculiar honor, and I remained silent. Hamilton had probably instructed his butler to raise the German flag. He may have confused the flags. Perhaps it didn't matter to him which emblem of the various European Negro states was raised."
>
> Baron Geyr von Schweppenburg[42]

The new ambassador arrived in London with the intention of establishing a lasting Anglo-German alliance. If this Anglo-German alliance was to come about at all, and perhaps even be lasting, it had to be based on mutual respect, a category of international relations that is as vague as it is important. Beyond formal treaty agreements that still had to be reached, this required contact at the level of political culture, because the mere text of an intergovernmental alliance treaty says little about its actual stability and political efficiency. The elites of the alliance partners must establish personal contacts and a certain sense of commonality. As we have seen, Ribbentrop succeeded in establishing some such contacts through his informal visits to England.

---

[41] Quoted from ADAP, C, VI/2, Doc. 380.

[42] Quoted from *Schweppenburg*, Memoirs, p. 108.

[43] Cf. *Jones*, Diary, p. 248, entry dated September 5, 1936. *Jones* praised *Ribbentrop's* manner of "frankly and fully, and not diplomatically." However, various comments by *Jones* also indicate that *Ribbentrop* increasingly lost these qualities later in his role as ambassador and then as minister. At least from the British point of view, he then appeared stiff, pompous, and unyielding, although he was in prominent company in this regard: *Anthony Eden* later compared *Charles de Gaulle's* demeanor with that of *Ribbentrop.* See *Harvey,* Diaries II, p. 164, entry dated October 1, 1942.

In 1936, the "West" in the form of the US, France, and Great Britain had less of this sense of alliance than it might appear in retrospect, but still considerably more than other states at the time. After all, there was no formal alliance between these states, and there were clear conflicts of interest of an economic and political nature. The United States had never joined the League of Nations, which the two Western European powers had gladly established as the center of their postwar policy. Great Britain, on the other hand, continued to regard itself as one of the world's major political centers, and the leading figures in the English ruling class would have vigorously rejected the prospect of conducting future policy according to the standards or even the wishes expressed in Washington. Ribbentrop therefore had something significant to offer in terms of power politics when he came to London: German support for a renewed expansion of imperial British power. Whether this constellation could come about and last, however, also depended on whether the political cultures were compatible.

The importance of this political and cultural connection is illustrated by the history of the alliance that the British government actually concluded in 1939. The Anglo-Polish agreements of 1939 formally constituted an unrestricted alliance in which the contracting parties mutually recognized each other as guarantors of their respective empires and pledged their unconditional support in the event of even an indirect threat to the vital interests of one of the contracting parties. However, it was obvious that the Republic of Poland could hardly guarantee the British Empire. Conversely, this did not work either, as the British government – apart from promises on paper – did not recognize its Polish treaty partner as an equal. It merely saw it as a function in a political enterprise that, despite Ribbentrop's efforts, was ultimately directed against German policy in 1938/39. In this respect, the alliance lacked good intentions and substance. It ended in English betrayal. The same was true of the other total alliance that had been concluded in the spring of 1939: the German-Italian pact was also not fulfilled in 1939 and ended in betrayal in 1943. Here, too, despite the theoretically stronger affinity between two "fascist" states, there were too few commonalities among the elites.

A treaty with England, in which Germany, rather than Poland, was to assume the role of guarantor of English possessions, as sought by the German side and offered until the outbreak of war in 1939,[44] had to include recognition of the regime by the British during the Nazi era. This had to go beyond formal treaty agreements and include recognition of the regime in its

---

[44] Most recently on August 25, 1939, in the *Hitler-Henderson* conversation. Cf. ADAP, Series D, Vol. VII, Doc. 265.

include special manifestations. National Socialism considered itself "new," which was more than just a propaganda slogan. The staging of the new was part of the substance of the National Socialist regime, and the regime made no secret of this. The party's own Eher publishing house even sold postcards showing Hitler being photographed as he practiced the grand gestures of a theater actor for his appearances as "Führer." The particular style of National Socialist rule, as expressed in uniform-loving mass marches,[45] light domes, Thingstätten, neoclassical architecture, enthusiasm for technology, and campfire romanticism, but also in racial theories and the threat of imprisonment in camps for opponents, had to be accepted for an alliance to be concluded in England. Now, many in England considered the latter to be a temporary phenomenon, and in any case not a decisive obstacle to political cooperation. On the other hand, the neo-pagan and socialist expressions of National Socialism, as well as the predominantly petty-bourgeois origins of its leadership, were met with contempt in England. The English ruling class, which was often intermarried, still influenced by Anglicanism, and accustomed to its leading role, could not tolerate this, even stylistically. They placed great importance on maintaining distance of any kind, and did so demonstratively, as otherwise their elitist claims could hardly be upheld. Even long after the outbreak of war, little changed in this regard. The ruling classes of the two Western European powers believed that they could and must ritually assert their class rule both internally and externally. André Maurois reports on a telling scene in Paris in June 1940 during a German air raid. Duff Cooper, one of Ribbentrop's most ardent opponents and a determined supporter of the war, who was serving as Minister of Information at the time, was also involved. They met with two French ministers for lunch:

> As we were about to sit down at the table at the Ritz, the alarm sounded. Immediately, the waiters disappeared into the shelter as instructed. The ministers and their entourage were in an awkward situation. Going into the shelter seemed to them a sign of a lack of courage, and serving themselves did not seem appropriate to their dignity. They decided to sit down at the table in front of empty plates and wait, accompanied by a fierce barrage of gunfire. But the alarm lasted a long time, and the hungrier the gentlemen became, the more sluggish the conversation became."[46]

As is well known, it is only a small step from the sublime to the ridiculous. The Anglo-French elite was still searching for the right attitude toward the war it had declared on Germany on September 3, 1939. The

---

[45] During a visit to the residence of the former British Minister of Aviation, *Lord Londonderry*, in Northern Ireland, *Ribbentrop* presented him with a 45 cm tall porcelain statue of a helmeted SS man with a swastika flag, produced by the Allach company, which apparently still has its place in the household today. Cf. *Kershaw*, Friends, p. 7.

[46] Quoted from *Maurois*, Tragedy, p. 104 f.

Conditions that had prevailed in London in the 1930s and which led Duff Cooper to feel it unnecessary to offer a chair to the German naval attaché who had come in to talk to him. He himself remained demonstratively seated. A man like Joachim von Ribbentrop, who had achieved wealth and social status through his own efforts but was considered a "homo novus," offered scope for attack from the perspective of these social circles, which defined themselves by their internal and external solidarity. The stylistic praise that Edward VIII had for him was not shared by many. JvR's wholesale beverage business or his adopted title of nobility were useful targets for attacks against him, although it can be assumed that other targets could have been found for other people as well. Ribbentrop, in any case, was deliberately disparaged in the press.

Against this backdrop, his attempt to go beyond the normal activities of an ambassador in London and also act stylistically as a representative of a new Germany should be seen. This point is worth mentioning because, as described, it was to become eminently politically relevant. It could lay the foundation for the success of Ambassador von Ribbentrop, just as it could become an expression of the failure of his mission, as it ultimately went down in history in many cases. The English leadership rejected this new style, and the principled opponents of a pro-German policy saw this as a pivotal point to use for a campaign in their favor. FitzRandolph describes a

---

[47] The title of nobility in particular remained the subject of constant gossip, even in Germany and beyond 1945. Preserving a line of nobility through adoption was not an unusual practice in itself. *Ribbentrop's* adoption in 1925 was by no means out of step with the times. His cabinet colleague *Schwerin-Krosigk,* who was finance minister of the German Reich from 1933 to 1945, had also acquired the name and title of "Count von Schwerin-Krosigk" in the same year, 1925, through adoption by a childless uncle. See *Goehrke,* Krosigk, p. 13. Unlike in *Ribbentrop's* case, this apparently did not result in any negative gossip, so that the constant controversies surrounding *Ribbentrop's* aristocratic title are more likely an example of the peculiar problems *Ribbentrop* had with society's envy.

Lieutenant *General Ribbentrop* had earned his noble title on the battlefield during the war against Denmark in 1864 at the Düppeler Schanzen, along with the Pour le mérite award. (See also his brief characterization as a member of the 'Cercle Intime' of the Kreuzzeitung in *Theodor Fontane's* autobiography "Von Zwanzig bis Dreißig" [From Twenty to Thirty], p. 194.) In the fall of 1943, *Ribbentrop* exchanged letters with Minister of Justice *Thierack* on the subject of nobility. Thierack had written to *Ribbentrop* because a "miller and old farmer" named *Guido Dornbusch* had claimed that *Ribbentrop* had pushed for adoption. There was no evidence to support this claim, and the question of whether the irrelevant and disrespectful remarks of an old farmer in the midst of total war seriously necessitated an exchange of letters between two ministers could actually be answered with a clear "no." Nevertheless, *Ribbentrop* again sought statements on this matter. See letter *from Ribbentrop to Thierack,* October 9, 1943. BA KO NL Ribbentrop.

[48] See *Coucy*, Battle, p. 22. *Coucy* combines this information with high praise for *Ribbentrop's* abilities, which he believed were underestimated at the time, and an unreserved condemnation of his alleged unscrupulousness.

Scene in which Ribbentrop met him at a social gathering and, smiling, embarrassed him with what he considered to be a cheerful and "more elegant" German greeting:

> "I believe that he felt it was his mission to show the English that Germans should be allowed to behave abroad in the same carefree manner as the English are known to do with their customs abroad. But such an argument is probably indisputable, since the English (with all due respect for this mistake) have a calm and therefore extremely silent arrogance. It was these forced things, small as they may have been, that the English found very funny,
> "loud," restless, and even parvenu-like. In his memoirs, for example, former British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon writes how the English once racked their brains over a brilliant invitation card written in German (during Ribbentrop's time). ... Ribbentrop, I believe, did not realize at the time what an immensely useful service he was doing to the clique that was keen on such things, which was completely cool towards him in London anyway, even if it sometimes (in part) accepted his invitations."[49]

But even at the German embassy, JvR's project was met with remarkable incomprehension, which had apparently arisen even before his arrival as ambassador. A good example of the rejection of Ribbentrop's style in the second row was the military attaché Geyr von Schweppenburg. Whatever Ribbentrop did seemed to meet with his disapproval, although in his memoirs he emphasizes that Ribbentrop always treated him with the utmost courtesy and "like a gentleman." In his later published volume on Leopold von Hoesch, Ribbentrop's predecessor in London, he spoke somewhat convolutedly of the
Ribbentrop's "unfortunate and, in part, undeserved fate," who, "unlike other standard-bearers around Hitler, also had a human side." Nevertheless, he is said to have immediately expressed strong aversion to, for example, the newly installed telephones in the embassy, which were allegedly an inappropriate luxury. He interpreted and commented indignantly on Ribbentrop's request to embassy staff upon taking office to act as a "conspiratorial community" in the future as a demand to abandon any personal opinions in the future. He apparently considered the new ambassador's suggestions that perhaps a little more information about the military preparations in England could be obtained through financial assistance to be an unthinkably immoral offer:

> "To apply such ideas, which seem to have been taken from a suburban cinema or a trashy novel, to people with the character and professional qualities of my friends in the British General Staff, or even to hint at them, seemed to me to make any further discussion hopeless."[51]

---

49 Quoted from *FitzRandolph*, London, p. 114 f.
50 Cf. *Schweppenburg*, Hoesch, p. 35.
51 Quoted from *Schweppenburg*, Memories, p. 115 f.

In the minds of conservative Germans at the embassy and the Foreign Office, English society was clearly seen only as the intact gathering of honorable people that it pretended to be, not as the financially vulnerable society that it actually was. At the same time, the Czech government, for example, was engaged in widespread financial lobbying in London, as the Germans discovered after the invasion of Prague in 1939 on the basis of relevant documents and presented to the public as an indictment of the "democratic press." It was precisely the hard core of political opponents of an Anglo-German alliance around Winston Churchill, Archibald Sinclair, and Wickham Steed who were generously rewarded for their political efforts, among other things from Prague. ([52])In 1936, Steed even received a regular monthly salary from the Czech government "for his political articles," but he was probably an exception.[53] The Italian ambassador At-tolico's scathing remark that the German conservatives' ideas about relations with England based on a common concept of gentlemanliness were "as stupid as the ideas of cadet school students" was therefore not unfounded.[54] The conservatives had also recognized the problem of the need for a common "concept" for political cooperation between the two countries, but they were far too optimistic in their assessment of the willingness of the English side and had an inaccurate picture of English society.

Ribbentrop's attempt to use the London embassy to pursue political goals by commercial means met with little response there. Goebbels' press attaché at the London embassy, Sigismund Sizzo FitzRandolph, reacted in much the same way as Geyr von Schweppenburg to Ribbentrop's request for financial assistance with press relations. In England, too, journalism often followed the obvious interests of some journalists and publicists. The English press undoubtedly attacked the Nazi regime with both truth and fiction, partly because of financial advantages, while the British government took the position that it could not influence the press. Ribbentrop believed that...

---

[52] *Wickham Steed* received donations from Prague starting in 1923, the first installment amounting to £8,000, or approximately 160,000 Reichsmarks. See *Urban*, Demokratenpresse, p. 97 f.

[53] See *Urban*, Demokratenpresse, p. 108 f. The "Friends of Europe," one of the organizations of this persuasion, which had published an accusatory summary of Mein Kampf, among other things, also received funds from Prague. See *Urban*, Demokratenpresse, p. 150 and *Atholl*, Mein Kampf, passim.

[54] According to *Attolico* in conversation with *C. J. Burckhardt* in 1939: "Take ... a man like *Hassell* (the German ambassador in Rome; author's note), he talks and rants away, he always wants to tell the British everything and thinks they have only one interest, a strong, conservative national government in Germany imbued with *Tirpitz's* ideas, possibly a monarchy, and that England should then show such a government its full sympathy, sympathy based on a common "gentlemanly concept"; all of which is as stupid as the ideas of cadet students ...". Quoted from *Knipping,* Machtbewußtsein,
p. 118.

This was not to be, which would later lead to clashes with Ambassador Henderson in Berlin. At best, it was only part of the truth. After his appointment as ambassador, Ribbentrop summoned FitzRandolph to Berlin before his departure. After a few hints, they got to the heart of the matter: the possibility of financially influencing the English press. FitzRandolph refused:

> "This patch was dangerous. Perhaps not for Ribbentrop, but for me. Moreover, such a procedure would have caused serious damage to the interests of the Reich even in the experimental stage. I also thought of my official instructions and my repeated warnings within the Propaganda Ministry not to even consider trying to buy influence with millions of dollars in some English press companies, because it would have been a futile endeavor."([55])

This approach therefore remained unanswered. There was no German press policy along these lines, at least not in England, although Ribbentrop made some attempts in this direction. Instead, Germany established its own media. Finally, in the late memoirs, a rumor spread that Ribbentrop, despite being advised to do so, had naively decided against using financial means to gain political influence in England. Reinhard Spitzy([56])claimed that Ribbentrop had been advised to attempt to bribe Winston Churchill and that Ribbentrop had refused because Churchill was a "dead man." According to Spitzy, it would have been important "to operate like Philip of Macedon with bags of gold! No particular genius is required to use gold."([57])Here, the memoirist reveals himself to be a fantasist. Not only is his description of Ribbentrop's attitude toward money matters obviously incorrect, but Ribbentrop did not consider Churchill to be a politically dead man, of all people, and instead courted him through conversation. On the other hand, as we have seen, the problems of political landscape maintenance through financial support are always considerable, and the risks are high for both sides, if only because of the threat of indiscretion. This is particularly evident in the case of Churchill. In fact, Churchill's political activities since 1936 took place in the

---

[55] Quoted from *FitzRandolph*, London, p. 81. This attitude was probably influenced by the fact that the press attachés at the embassies reported directly to the Propaganda Ministry, so that they first reported there and the reports were then forwarded to the Foreign Office. It was only when he became minister that JvR attempted to change this. See *Schmidt,* Diary, draft curriculum vitae from August 1947.

[56] *Reinhard Spitzy*, born in 1912, member of the NSDAP and SS since 1931, Ribbentrop's office from November 6, 1934, to November 12, 1938 (see *Jacobsen,* Außenpolitik, p. 702). Graduated from the École libre des sciences politiques in Paris in 1936, worked at the German Embassy in London as Ribbentrop's secretary from 1936, then joined the Foreign Office in 1938, and was Ribbentrop's advisor in Vienna until 1939. From April 1939, *Spitzy* was employed by the Henry Mann Agency, the representative office of the National City Bank in Germany. His annual salary is said to have been a princely 20,000 Reichsmarks. *Nevile Henderson* provided *Spitzy* with a "multi-year special visa" for England. See *Spitzy,* Confessions, p. 361.

[57] See *Spitzy*, Confessions, p. 155.

This took place within the framework of a support network that also worked with financial resources. From 1938 onwards, Churchill can be said to have been financially dependent on Henry Strakosch, but this by no means represented an opportunity to use money to persuade Churchill to take any political action. An attempt by Ribbentrop to buy out Churchill, the figurehead of the political opposition to a German-English rapprochement, was indeed an absurd idea – if the proposal was ever made at all.

Ribbentrop's strategy was more successful in France, where the press of all persuasions was apparently even less cautious than its English counterpart. Otto Abetz, who later became ambassador, had up to 350,000 francs a month at his disposal for covert press work as an employee of Ribbentrop's office in Paris. He managed to use it effectively, both through direct payments to various journalists and through printing subsidies for publications.[59] In Paris the staff of the German embassy was also more open to this approach than in London.[60] This may also have been due to the fact that in Paris they saw themselves in direct competition with the British embassy, whose press chief, Charles Mendl, had, according to Ribbentrop's assessment, been cultivating the political landscape for years with millions of francs.[61]

One of the more well-known controversies from Ribbentrop's time as ambassador also falls under the heading of stylistic issues. Although hardly worth getting excited about from today's perspective, it should be mentioned here in conclusion. For the underlying affair is quite typical of the way symbolic politics were conducted in the 1930s, how Ribbentrop's gestures were used against him by interested politicians in England, and at the same time sheds light on the internal conflicts within the Foreign Office. The occasion: as German ambassador in London, Ribbentrop greeted the English king with his right arm raised in the Hitler salute.

---

[58] *Spitzy's* memoirs, "So haben wir das Reich verspielt" (How We Lost the Reich), tend to embellish events and contain a large number of unverifiable rumors and demonstrably false claims, including about *Ribbentrop's* activities and assessments in London. For *Spitzy*, a member of the SS and the NSDAP and an "old fighter," it was not "we" who gambled away the Reich, i.e., himself and others, but others. The book is an expression of the party circles' aversion to the foreign minister and, for the most part, a justification of "our National Socialism" and its "old, honest battle cry of 'peace, freedom, bread,'" which *Ribbentrop* "never understood." See *Spitzy,* p. 289. It is not a very reliable source, but despite its obviously apologetic and denunciatory character—in its own cause—it has had a considerable influence on research.

[59] See *Ray*, Abetz, p. 202 ff.

[60] *Abetz* also arranged stays in Germany for French-speaking journalists. One example was *Dennis de Rougemont*, whom he secured a position as a lecturer at the University of Frankfurt from October 1935 to June 1936 and who wrote a highly acclaimed, subtly critical report on his stay. National Socialism was a religious phenomenon that was alien to the West and should be countered by strengthening one's own convictions. See *Rougemont,* Journal, passim.

[61] According to *Ribbentrop* in his main report, cf. *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 62.

This gesture broke with courtly ritual at the English royal residence in an unusual way, as it had previously been customary for foreign representatives to adhere to English conventions. They could express their own culture through clothing or uniforms or gifts, but less so through their own styles of greeting. In the context of Ribbentrop's other activities in matters of style, this once again provided opponents of a German-English alliance agreement with a template for polemical articles about the alleged disregard for the crown and the person of the king. In fact, the initiative for this greeting apparently came from a direct request by Hitler,(62) so criticism of Ribbentrop may have been misplaced anyway. King George VI also reacted little to the incident. His chief of protocol merely informed the German delegation afterwards that he wanted to be informed of such unusual gestures in future.[63]Nevertheless, Henry Wickham Steed's Focus network recognized the scandalous potential of this gesture and, after a week's preparation, responded with corresponding accusations by Steed himself, who described it as an "insult to the king" in a speech at Oxford, while a cartoon in the Evening Standard simultaneously ridiculed it.[64]The German press responded by describing the salute of a holder of the Golden Party Badge as "Honorary tribute" and its rejection as an insult. [65]

Years later, in March 1940, a remarkable article in the Irish Independent addressed this point. The author, Kees van Hoek, described himself as an opponent of Nazism and Ribbentrop as an "enigma" who, when they met in person, repeatedly gave him the "uncomfortable feeling" that Germany could establish "a strong position in many respects":

> "Strange lapses such as the Nazi salute at court are typical 'defaults de ses qualités'. Because of his staunch convictions, he did not want to admit that it would be advisable to refrain from using this salute abroad. Since he is a man of action,

---

[62] Cf. *Tennant*, Account, p. 196. German historians joined the ranks of uninformed critics. *Rainer Schmidt,* who apparently does not seem to know *Tennant*, a man so important for German-English relations, trusts the rumor spread by *Reinhard Spitzy* that *Hitler* only later "condemned" *Ribbentrop* to stick to the "German salute." See *Schmidt,* Außenpolitik, p. 75. According to the printed files, *Ribbentrop* himself proposed this. See ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 201, p. 436 f., *Ribbentrop* to *Hitler* and *Neurath*, February 14, 1937.

[63] See *Putlitz*, Dossier, pp. 121–123, and *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 125.

[64]The renowned, staunchly anti-fascist cartoonist *David Low* depicted the raised arm as a sign that a student wanted to use the restroom. *Low* would later welcome the long-awaited takeover of power by the personification of British belligerence with drawings such as "All behind you, Winston" from May 14, 1940, and become the official British war artist. His newspaper, the Evening Standard, liked to pick up on politicized scandal stories and two years later also became the point of contact for *Robert Boothby* when he wanted to launch his self-invented story of a German ultimatum to Romania in the press in the spring. See *Dugdale,* Diaries, p. 131 f., entry dated March 22, 1939.

[65] Cf. PA AA, London 1594, excerpts from the press exchange of February 1937.

> The dynamic development of the German revolution prompted him to run headlong into the stone wall of cumbersome British tradition; his negotiations with the Italians and Russians, on the other hand, were facilitated by this energy."(66)

This strangely worded acknowledgment of the "German Revolution" and its mistakes clearly reflected the time at which it was written; in fact, it seemed somewhat contrived in the following sentences. In March 1940, in the midst of the "phony war" between the Western powers and Germany, this section of the neutral press did not seem to want to alienate anyone.

The greeting scene itself took place on February 4, 1937, during a general reception of the diplomatic corps by the new King George VI. Ribbentrop undoubtedly felt that the abdication of Edward VIII in December of the previous year, who had requested him as ambassador and who wanted to interpret his royal role not only politically but also in favor of Anglo-German relations, was a setback. He accused his political opponents, notably Duff Cooper, of provoking and accelerating the throne crisis because of Edward's pro-Nazi stance. (67) Now, in any case, he had to introduce himself to a new British head of state who was not known for his pro-German sympathies. The German ambassador and his entourage had been placed between the USSR and the Spanish Republic by the British chief of protocol for this purpose. After a brief conversation, the king turned to the German diplomat Woermann, while Ribbentrop sealed the conclusion of his own conversation with the king by raising his right arm. The abruptness of the gesture may have been due to a slip-up on the literally slippery diplomatic floor in this first instance. But Ribbentrop apparently considered this a viable idea and repeated the greeting on various occasions, even in the presence of the king, in the casual form of a raised forearm, which was also favored by Hitler. In a letter to Hitler and the Foreign Office, he reported that he had rejected negative reactions to the then Deputy Foreign Minister Halifax:

> "The natural honoring of the British monarch with the German salute by the first Nazi ambassador to the court of St. James was deliberately distorted by part of the press and accompanied by stupid comments. ... I must strongly reject such machinations and, based on my observations in recent months, attribute them to the agitation of irresponsible elements against National Socialism and Germany."(69)

---

66 PA-AA R 27157, Report by the Reich Press Office of the NSDAP, Munich, March 28, 1940. Translation of the article "Herr von Ribbentrop, das Rätsel" (Mr. von Ribbentrop, the Enigma) in the Irish Independent of March 12, 1940.

67 Cf. *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, 133 f.

68 This is how *Ribbentrop* is said to have justified the gesture to *Hesse*. See *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 30.

69 Cf. ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 201, p. 436 f., *Ribbentrop* to *Hitler* and *Neurath*, February 14, 1937.

There was so much truth in this that it was the familiar names who did not let this opportunity pass them by this time either. Ribbentrop attempted to counter Steed's speech with an article in the National Socialist Party Correspondence, because only in this way could the "repeatedly staged press campaign, which is intended to incite the English people against Germany, gradually be called off." Neurath apparently had little faith in such responses and wrote:
"That is not true" in the margin of the letter. In a separate letter on the same subject dated the same day, Ribbentrop stated that he had given the salute in the form "generally used by the Führer and Reich Chancellor by raising the right forearm." He proposed introducing this as a general salute in German diplomacy. A few months later, he had the satisfaction of seeing Edward VIII, the former King of England and current Duke of Windsor, raise his right arm in this manner during a meeting with Hitler in Berlin, bringing the affair to a provisional conclusion.[72]

4. Nevile Henderson – Ambassador without a power base

When Chamberlain became head of government, he found Nevile Henderson, a diplomat who had just been nominated for the position, in the post of British ambassador in Berlin. He had been appointed by Prime Minister Baldwin in 1937. Some of Henderson's statements, for example, supported the more optimistic of Ribbentrop's assumptions about future British policy, although Ribbentrop did not specifically mention this in his ambassador's report. They signaled fundamental and far-reaching agreement with Hitler's policy of revising the borders of Greater Germany, as his shocked American ambassador colleague Dodd noted. Henderson had equated Hitler with Bismarck in a skewed comparison:

> "Hitler's Germany is repeating Bismarck's policy of annexing all European states in which people of German descent live—Austria, Czechoslovakia, and other countries." Although I had already suspected that Henderson was inclined to favor Germany's annexation policy, I had not thought that he would go so far in his statements. He then added: 'Germany must have supremacy in the Danube-Balkan region, which means it must rule Europe. England and the British Empire, together with the United States, will rule the seas. England and Germany must establish close economic and political relations and control the world.'" [73]

---

[70] See ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 201, p. 437.

[71] See ADAP, C, VI/1, Doc. 202, p. 445, February 14, 1937.

[72] Cf. *Cave Brown*, Servant, p. 186.

[73] Quoted in *Dodd*, Diplomat, p. 470, entry dated June 23, 1937. *Dodd* considered these prospects for an English policy of world domination based on an American-English and English-German compromise to be unrealistic anyway. *Henderson* "does not seem to know that in

These were precisely the ideas that the National Socialist leadership had in mind and that Ribbentrop had promoted on their behalf as ambassador in London. However, they had nothing to do with Bismarck's policies. The Prussian Prime Minister and Reich Chancellor had just refrained from annexing German-populated parts of the Austrian Empire, such as what would later become Czechoslovakia. The fact that a man like Henderson had been sent to Berlin, who fueled Nazi hopes of annexation and unification in diplomatic circles with his vocal statements, could be interpreted as a positive signal in this direction. However, a closer look at the background to Henderson's appointment could raise doubts, as Henderson had apparently been the choice of the declared opponents of a German-British agreement on this matter – Anthony Eden and Robert Vansittart. Their advice had prompted Prime Minister Baldwin, who shied away from any visible gesture of negotiation despite constant German offers, to send Henderson to Berlin.[74] The newly appointed ambassador to Berlin could be considered a surprising choice, to say the least, as he was not at the center of British politics, being the current ambassador of the British Empire to Argentina. Nor had he held any of the truly relevant foreign posts of the Foreign Office in his previous career,[75] not even a subordinate one with regard to Germany. Henderson's only contact with the issue of British-German relations before 1937 had been as an employee

---

England and America oppose the cruel treatment of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews by the Nazis." See ibid. p. 470.

[74] *Baldwin* to *Thomas Jones*. See Jones, Diary, p. 314, record of a conversation with *Baldwin* on February 15, 1937. *Walford Selby,* British ambassador in Vienna from 1933 to 1937 and in Lisbon from 1937 to 1940, later described *Vansittart* as the decisive factor in this appointment. See *Selby,* Twilight, p. 74.

[75] According to *Rudi Strauch's* account in his biography of Henderson, *Henderson's* professional career prior to his mission in Berlin reads like a series of questionable decisions, short stays, and failures. There is no evidence in the university records of his alleged studies in Bonn at the turn of the century. See *Strauch,* Henderson, p. 15. *Henderson* left little trace at any of his professional stations, often having to contend with complaints about his lack of enthusiasm for work. He never even set foot in Paraguay, which had been entrusted to him diplomatically at the same time as Argentina. His only personal contact with the decision-makers of international politics in the 1930s was apparently before his transfer to Berlin in the winter of 1936, when US President *Franklin D. Roosevelt,* Secretary of State *Cordell Hull*, and his deputy *Sumner Welles,* the entire leadership of American foreign policy, were in Buenos Aires. The occasion was the Pan-American Congress of twenty-one states. *Henderson* had the opportunity to meet *Roosevelt* there in person and praised the impression he gained of him in his memoirs, published in 1945. A few weeks later, in January 1937, *Anthony Eden* sent a telegram to Buenos Aires offering him the post in Berlin. *Henderson* described the requirements of the post as "thoroughly uncongenial to me" and therefore felt "very unworthy and unsuited." See *Henderson,* Water, p. 206. *Strauch* concludes that it is "not yet possible to explain the motives" that led to *Henderson's* appointment. See *Strauch,* Henderson, p. 32.

[the]Foreign Office's blockade department between 1916 and 1918 to buy up the entire Norwegian herring catch, which was left to rot in British fields rather than be exported to Germany. Henderson had never been [to]Berlin on business, so his ignorance of Bismarck, as quoted above, was hardly coincidental. Against this background, and after analyzing British internal documents, his appointment can be considered an opaque act, at the very least, despite all the pro-German signals he sent out. (77)Foreign Minister Eden later distanced himself from this personnel decision and described it as unfortunate, as if he had not promoted it himself.[78] However, Henderson's appointment enabled him and Robert Vansittart to politically neutralize the British Embassy in Berlin. The previous ambassador in Berlin, Phipps, who had been very critical of National Socialism, had found a diplomatic lightweight in Henderson as his successor. For the time being, he could not be replaced by anyone whom the incoming Prime Minister Chamberlain might have liked to appoint.

As early as 1937, one could conclude with some suspicion that British policy was using such moves to create an alibi in the eyes of the public, which could ultimately enable a policy directed against Germany. Henderson could "signal" a lot, but he could not offer anything binding. He could loudly proclaim Britain's willingness to make concessions, as he did to William Dodd. But no clear signals in this direction came from London, and this was decisive.

Phipps, a critic of the Nazis, was by no means relegated to a marginal position by Berlin, but continued to represent his views in Paris, England's most important European ally. This also did not indicate a pro-German change of course in English foreign policy. In his report, Ribbentrop also considered the possible reasons behind the British government's behavior: "This would be consistent with the traditional British tendency to gather arguments for the question of guilt in a possible future war."(79) This was indeed the thinking in London. Even a proponent of German-British reconciliation such as Thomas Jones welcomed

---

76 Cf. *Strauch*, Henderson, p. 20.

77 Until his death, all those involved, including *Henderson* himself, kept secret the fact that immediately before his departure for Berlin on April 23, 1937, he had been appointed a member of the Privy Council, a lifetime appointment by the king. The obituary in The Times in December 1942 gave the incorrect year of 1939 for this appointment. See *Strauch,* Henderson, p. 33.

78 Cf. *Eden*, Dictators, p. 504. When *Henderson* received his final instructions from *Eden* on how he should conduct himself in Berlin, there was apparently already a conflict over form and content. *Eden* asked *Vansittart* to dissuade *Henderson* from his optimism and stated ambitions in a private conversation. Cf. *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 41,
April 23, 1937.

79 Quoted in *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 67.

shortly after Austria's annexation, barely two months after Ribbentrop's memo, this aspect of the new policy. Prime Minister Chamberlain had meanwhile snubbed Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, who was overly critical of dictators and who, shortly before his appointment as prime minister, had also taken a personnel decision away from him by sending Henderson, causing him to resign in early 1938:

> "I do not regret Chamberlain's rejection of Eden's policy, even if it should prove to be too late. We must convince the world that we are prepared to exercise absurd patience in order to preserve peace. Our people will not fight until they are convinced that a fair settlement has been attempted with the potential enemy."[80]

In fact, despite all the announcements, no British offers of compensation along the lines outlined by Henderson were forthcoming in the period that followed. On the contrary, British politicians attempted to sabotage the beginnings of a policy of revision in Austria, as he had outlined, and to prevent German countermeasures with a barely veiled threat of war. Shortly after Ribbentrop's arrival in London for a double visit as outgoing ambassador and new foreign minister, the first reports of a planned referendum in Austria reached the British capital at noon on March 9, 1938. The background to this was unclear. The initiative was and is attributed personally to Austria's Chancellor Schuschnigg, who, however, lacked the constitutional authority to take such a step. From an organizational point of view, the vote could not be held in the planned four days (sic) due to the lack of a voter register. The suggestive nature of the question – "Do you want an authoritarian, Christian Austria?" – and Schuschnigg's instruction to provide only "yes" ballots at the polling stations made the whole affair a political joke. However, once implemented, this joke would cement Austrian affairs for years to come. The "will of the people" thus determined would stand in the way of any Ribbentrop attempt to push through a German-Austrian union. One might think that this idea had not come to Schuschnigg entirely on his own and that he had allies. Britain's Foreign Minister Halifax could have been such an ally and, in any case, promptly behaved in this manner. He seized the opportunity and, one day later, on the morning of March 10, 1938, during Ribbentrop's inaugural visit as Foreign Minister, warned him not to take any action against the referendum in Austria. Ribbentrop had rightly described it to him as a "sham" because of its well-known shortcomings. An open vote would always be in favor of German-Austrian unity, Ribbentrop said. Halifax replied that they did not want war, but that if war did break out over such issues, no one knew where it might end or who would be responsible.

---

80 Quoted from *Jones*, Diary, p. 396, March 20, 1938.

not everything would be involved in it.[81] The Austrian plebiscite, which Halifax himself is said to have admitted internally was "stupid and provocative," was nevertheless to be held "freely and undisturbed" by this barely veiled threat of war.[82] The meaning was clear. The Germans "only understand the language of force," Halifax told Alexander Cadogan. ([83])Halifax had the "agreed text" of this discussion sent to Germany, and Ambassador Henderson was instructed to present it to Hitler accordingly. ([84])Thomas Inskip was even clearer the following day. The Minister for the Coordination of National Defense spoke to Ribbentrop about the possibility of British military intervention if Germany were to accelerate the course of events in Austria "with a violent solution." This, too, was aimed at providing massive security for the proclamation of permanent independence for the Alpine republic, which was planned with the help of a referendum.[85]Schuschnigg had proceeded clumsily. But this strong British support for his project, barely twenty-four hours after it became known, was at least very unusual. It pointed to prior agreements. Halifax's reaction to the first news of the cancellation of this project signaled something similar. On the same day, he reacted "agitatedly" to Ribbentrop and demanded a new, differently organized referendum. For him, this essentially meant sending "an international police force to Austria to ensure an impartial vote."([86])

However, for almost two decades and even a few hours earlier—despite Ribbentrop's clear objections to Schuschnigg's voting farce—an impartial vote by Austria in favor of British foreign policy or Halifax personally had not been an issue at all. This had been the case for as long as it was possible to ignore the joint efforts of the Weimar Republic and the Republic of Austria in this matter, or as long as the planned vote still seemed, from his point of view, to bring about the desired result of continued division. In view of this, it seemed more likely that

---

[81] Cf. ADAP, D, I, Doc. 145, p. 210 and p. 214. *Halifax* used this formulation repeatedly in the following months, including in connection with the May crisis in Czechoslovakia that soon followed. "In other words, he warned Germany that we would immediately support France in the event of an attack on Czechoslovakia." See *Channon,* Diary,
p. 157, entry dated May 22, 1938. Given France's alliance obligations, this had a passive component, but in view of the troop mobilization emanating from Prague and left unanswered by Germany, it could be interpreted as a hint of offensive action by both Western powers following a Czechoslovak provocation.

[82] Cf. *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 113, March 11, 1938.

[83] See *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 113, March 11, 1938.

[84] See DBFP 3/1, Nos. 8 and 15, and *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 185.

[85] Cf. ADAP, D, I, Doc. 149, p. 225, note by *Ribbentrop* dated March 11, 1938. This also refutes *Michael Bloch's* speculation that *Ribbentrop* did not adequately report to Berlin on the warnings of war issued by the British government on those days. Cf. *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 184 f.

[86] See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 150, p. 226, *Ribbentrop's* note of March 11, 1938.

the British government and its allies were blocking democratic developments and ultimately only "understood" violence and unilateral action. Halifax's sudden recollection of democratic standards was therefore so embarrassing that even Chamberlain seemed "unable to respond."[87] Unspoken, of course, this new proposal also meant that British foreign policy would have retained a direct right of co-determination in Austrian affairs for the foreseeable future with the international force proposed by Halifax and the inevitable negotiations on the exact modalities of coordination. This did not correspond to the ideas of the German government, which could and wanted to refer to the local conditions here. This had drastic consequences. Contrary to the British desire for further control, the post-war order of Versailles now began to change territorially as well. In a sense, the German-English conflict began during those days between March 10 and 12, 1938, with these English threats and the German-Austrian union that followed immediately afterwards, nevertheless on German terms. It was not yet a hot war, but it was a cold war over the right to determine the political situation in Central Europe.

For years, contradictory signals had been coming from London, the only thing they had in common being that any change in the status quo was made dependent on British approval, while the extent of this approval or disapproval could never be precisely determined by the German side. To support his concerns in this regard, Ribbentrop referred in his main report to the ongoing British rearmament program, which in 1937 still required the political and thus economic stabilization that Chamberlain was apparently trying to achieve. The time had not yet come for England to "take a strong stance." There was much talk of the year 1939, Ribbentrop said in his "main report," but he was betting on a later date.[88] This could explain the statements made by the new Foreign Minister Halifax during his conversation with Hitler in November 1937 that the status quo in Austria and Czechoslovakia could not be maintained in the long term. [89] In view of the English concern about a premature war, these statements could

---

[87] See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 150, p. 226, *Ribbentrop's* notes from March 11, 1938.

[88] See *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 68. In retrospect, the term "Thirty-Niners" became a catchphrase. It referred to the group of people who, in line with *Ribbentrop's* report, assumed that Britain would be superior in strength that year. This group included not only the well-known hardliners around *Robert Vansittart,* but also *Neville Chamberlain,* even though *Chamberlain* drew somewhat different conclusions. See *Newman,* Guarantee, p. 29.

[89]The Halifax Mission was initially compared in the English press to the Haldane Mission of 1912, which preceded the final German-English estrangement. *Fritz Berber* wrote a "scientific opinion" on this, apparently commissioned by *Ribbentrop*. The key issue for him was that the negotiations at that time were based on a German

"the intention of deterring us from implementing violent solutions that we allegedly intended to implement at a time that did not suit England, with the prospect of understanding and even support from England for a peaceful settlement of this and other issues (colonial issues)." (90)

This was a suspicious line of thought. Ribbentrop justified it with the accurate reference to British policy before 1914, which had been so ambiguous that Berlin was completely surprised by the British declaration of war. In principle, the current British armament program could serve to enable Britain to refuse any further concessions on the Austrian and Sudeten questions at the appropriate time as well as the colonial offers that had only been hinted at so far. The mere declarations of intent made so far did nothing to change this, just as, according to Ribbentrop, mistrust of Germany would remain on the British side despite the assurances given so far that its goals were limited to Central Europe.[92] Such arguments were "understandable to liberal minds," but could not "convince diehard politicians, who had forged and maintained a global empire with similar arguments."[93] In this respect, British policy found itself in a trap of mistrust due to its own history, a mistrust of the German situation, which, however, was also reinforced by Ribbentrop through his earlier comparisons of the national-

---

The talks were conducted with the aim of neutralizing England, in return for which a unilateral limitation of German naval armament was offered. The then Lord Chancellor *Richard Haldane* also came as a "private visitor," whom the German government believed to be authorized to negotiate, which the British government subsequently denied. According to *Berber*, *Haldane* had brought with him a proposal for a declaration that both sides should "refrain from unprovoked attacks against each other or from participating in an aggressive coalition against the other," which he then elaborated on considerably during the talks and which, according to *Berber,* was also approved by the cabinet in its original form. However, the English cabinet was not prepared to agree to neutralization. See PA AA, London 1710.

[90] Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 68.

[91] Shortly thereafter, on March 3, 1938, Ambassador *Henderson* pointed out to *Hitler* and *Ribbentrop*, referring to the German-Austrian agreements of the previous month, and then declared that he wanted "peaceful solutions with Austria and Czechoslovakia" and the "clarification of the colonial question."
"concern" about the German-Austrian agreements of the previous month and then declared that "peaceful solutions with Austria and Czechoslovakia" and the "clarification of the colonial question" belonged together. Was Germany prepared to agree to a new division of colonial territories in Africa? See *Strauch*, Henderson, p. 73.

[92] In this report, *Ribbentrop* referred to a conversation with *Chamberlain* about whether the Prime Minister would read *J. L. Garvin's* articles in The Observer. *Chamberlain* said no, they were too long for him. See *Garvin's* 7-page article ibid. dated December 12, 1937, i.e., at the time the main report was written. In it, *Garvin* openly advocates the annexation of Austria and German Bohemia, together with 10.5 million Germans, which he claims is of little significance in terms of world politics. See PA AA, London 1594. This did not prevent the Propaganda Ministry from staging an "anti-Jewish exhibition" in the Reichstag building in November 1938, which also involved the Observer: "English journalists are mocking this German statement and using the opportunity to dissuade their German-friendly colleague *Garvin* from his press policy." PA AA R 27091, p. 29052, report by the DR dated November 14, 1938, recommends checking the exhibition for errors.

[93] Quoted from PA AA R 28895a, p. 16.

socialist revolution had been involuntarily promoted by the beginnings of England's rise. If National Socialism was to represent the beginning of a policy similar to that pursued by England centuries ago with the establishment of a state church and the expulsion of all Jews – Ribbentrop had made this comparison to Ernest Tennant, as we have seen – then the end and scope of this path were indeed difficult to determine from the outside. To clarify this lingering mistrust, Ribbentrop now recommended focusing on negotiations, above all on negotiating methods that were as precise as possible, so as not to be taken by surprise by sham initiatives, but also to ascertain the real English willingness to reach an understanding. This meant being able to "play on the Rome-Berlin axis" and keeping open the further opportunity to allow world opinion to mature in line with German interests with regard to all the issues addressed. One point, however, seemed certain to Ribbentrop:

> "In my opinion, territorial revision of Czechoslovakia means the beginning of the dissolution of this state and thus war. Because: the Czechs are relying on their French alliance (Russian help is at least problematic at the moment) and will prefer to try to fight rather than give up"[94]

Only if France, like England, were to officially abandon the Czech state in its current form would the Czechs perhaps give in without a fight and grant autonomy to the Sudetenland, if not cession, according to Ribbentrop's assumption. This was accompanied by a warning, as Ribbentrop considered this development to be practically impossible: "The possibility of a territorial revision of Czechoslovakia by way of negotiations (is) simply not given."[95] Here he was proven wrong by events. Nine months later, in view of the behavior of the Western powers, the Czech government nevertheless gave up without taking up arms. The Munich Agreement revised the borders of Czechoslovakia without the war Ribbentrop feared taking place. In view of the mutual threats of war and the exclusion of the Czech government from the conference, it can at best be described as the result of "negotiations" with reservations. The German-Czech crisis had already brought the German-English conflict to the brink of war, and the apparent solution of the Munich Agreement could only reduce mutual mistrust for a short time. Ribbentrop concluded his report at the end of 1937 with the recommendation that "our future policy with England should continue to be aimed at reconciliation." At the same time, however, it was important to maintain and expand relations with Italy and Japan, both as an end in itself and "as constant factors in our foreign policy in our dealings with England."[96]

---

94 Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 73.
95 Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 74.
96 Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 74.

A few comments on the ideas expressed in this main report seem appropriate. Here we see the future foreign minister providing the German head of state and party leader with analyses and recommendations that essentially relate exclusively to revisionist goals in Central Europe with regard to Germans living on the fringes of Germany's borders. Colonies are also considered as a subject of negotiation, but are of secondary importance. There is no mention of any further goals with regard to zones of influence in Eastern Europe or even "living space in the East." Ribbentrop has no offensive goals in Poland or the USSR, nor does he attribute any to the German head of state and government. He is concerned with the possibility of uniting the German state with German Austria, which was proclaimed in 1918, in view of the English policy he has observed and, in his opinion, can be expected. According to the scenario presented here, achieving this goal will require the full art of statecraft and the full commitment of German resources. War is possible if individual states violently oppose this scenario. It is neither desirable within the framework of this Greater German policy, nor is this policy intended to prepare for a later, larger war. The USSR is mentioned only once, as a possible opposing intervening power in a military conflict over Czechoslovakia. Poland is regarded as an ally of France and thus indirectly of England. This is important to note insofar as Ribbentrop's political opponents at the same time attributed imaginative statements to him about a possible German march to India. (97)Such fabrications also left their mark on postwar literature, when Winston Churchill, among others, accused Ribbentrop of announcing the conquest of Poland and Ukraine in London.[98]Against the background of the ambassador's report, this must be relegated to the realm of legend, as must Churchill's false statements about the content of the Hoßbach Protocol and Hitler's ideas about future policy:

> On November 5, 1937, he (i.e., Hitler, author's note) outlined his plans for the future to the commanders of his armed forces. Germany needed more "living space." This

---

(97) For example, in the
According to these documents, *Ribbentrop* said: "Two or three small wars, my Führer" would have to be fought, "one in the direction of Czechoslovakia, one in the direction of the Black Sea, one in the direction of Turkey, and then India." See *Young*, X-Documents, p. 134 and p. 184 f.

98 The disinformation to which *Churchill* was exposed may also have contributed to this. On November 23, 1938, for example, *Ian Colvin*, an information officer officially working as a journalist in Germany, contacted him with "secret information" that Germany was preparing to extort its share of Ukraine from the Republic of Poland. *Hitler* had said this in a small circle after the Munich Conference, in the presence of the
"source" who had reported this to him. See CHAR 2/340 B, p. 162, *Colvin* to *Churchill* dated 23.11.38. At precisely this time, however, *Hitler* and *Ribbentrop* were courting Poland as an ally, among other things by recognizing Poland's exclusive rights to the whole of Ukraine.

was best found in Eastern Europe – in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. This goal required a major war and, incidentally, the extermination of the population living in those areas."[99]

Each of these assertions is untrue and can be classified as belonging to that area of British politics which Ribbentrop mentioned rather casually in his report. In his view, waging war in the English manner involved preparing and following up on its interpretation as an act of defense. For Ribbentrop, this also included the ability to mobilize both national and international public opinion in favor of war:

"It will not be impossible for the English government to portray a warlike development to both the English people and the Dominions as if British vital interests were threatened. Of course, such propaganda needs a certain amount of time before it becomes effective. The specter of a possible aerial bombardment of the British Isles still plays a special role here."[100]

Essentially, this warning meant that the decision to go to war against Germany had probably already been made in London. Ribbentrop recommended strengthening Germany's own power as the best, if not the only, chance of preserving peace. For him, this meant expanding Germany's territory at almost any cost, i.e., realizing the goals of Greater German revisionism. At the same time, however, allies had to be won over very quickly, allies who could exert a certain deterrent effect on England. When Ribbentrop wrote this report, there were no such allies. Neither Italy nor Japan had signed an alliance treaty beyond the militarily non-binding Anti-Comintern Pact ([101]. Italy repeatedly rejected repeated attempts to form an alliance in 1938. It was not until 1939 that the Italian-German pact was concluded in response to the formation of the Anglo-French-Polish tripartite coalition. When this too seemed insufficient to deter England from "war at any price," Ribbentrop finally traveled to Moscow to dampen English hopes once again by concluding a non-aggression pact with the USSR.

In line with these two objectives—expanding Germany's own base and establishing its own alliance system—Ribbentrop conceived his entire foreign policy in 1938/39. In his own view, he was compelled to act quickly

---

[99] Quoted from *Churchill*, The Second World War, I/1, p. 319.

[100] Report ("London A 5522") from *Ribbentrop* to *Hitler* dated December 28, 1937, quoted here from *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 64 f. However, the self-confidence of British government circles in 1937 was still great enough to regard any English declaration of war as "defense." *Lord Halifax*, for example, explicitly stated that year that the horrors of modern warfare were not as terrible as shying away from violence when it came to defending principles. See *Newman,* Guarantee, p. 67.

[101] Italy joined the pact about a year after it was signed on November 6, 1937, but for reasons of prestige insisted on being explicitly referred to as an "original signatory." See *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 89.

forced to do so, because British armament and propaganda preparations for war were already in full swing. Against this backdrop, this policy was indeed directed "against England," as contemporaries and historians have explained in detail. However, it was not because Ribbentrop was emotionally biased against England and therefore heading for war, as was often rumored, but because he believed that England, for its part, rejected German policy and the German government and might even want to start a war itself when the opportunity arose. Hitler's aggressive actions in Austria and Czechoslovakia were intended to take this attitude into account and followed a strategy, or rather, an assumed compulsion. Ribbentrop had outlined this in January 1938 in the conclusions of the final report, with particular reference to the clear imbalance between Chamberlain's almost revolutionary intentions and the lack of flexibility on the part of the English public:

> A clear concession by England on the Austrian-Czech question in line with our position could clear the air in Europe. However, based on my experience to date, I consider such a turn of events unlikely and believe that England would, at most, be forced to tolerate such a solution one day by the power of circumstances. I am reinforced in my view that this problem cannot be solved through official negotiations with England by the fact that Chamberlain is caught up in a system, both domestically and in foreign policy (with France), that makes major decisions infinitely difficult."([102])

A few weeks later, Ribbentrop held his letter of appointment in his hands. Hitler had understood and acted accordingly,[103] especially since he himself had recently stated in the Hoßbach meeting that England had already written off Austria and Czechoslovakia. The aim was to expand Germany's base to a "national base," as an observer such as Leon Trotsky conceded in the summer of 1939. Rumors were also circulating in the diplomatic corps in Berlin that this could possibly be done in coordination with the "pro-German group of English lords." The Belgian envoy Davignon expressed this view, interpreting Ribbentrop's appointment as a sign that he would lead the Foreign Ministry "in close agreement" with Chamberlain/Hoare, who were in dispute with the Eden/van Sitthart (sic) group.

---

[102] ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 132. January 2, 1938.

[103] Even in his last correspondence with the heads of government *Daladier* and *Chamberlain* in August 1939, he claimed that his actions in 1938 and 1939 had merely brought about a development that relieved the Western powers and the two heads of government of responsibility for the concessions made in the revision.

[104] PA AA, R 27157, confidential report dated February 18, 1938. According to this report, *Davginon* also commented on the "barrage of rumors defaming Ribbentrop" that were being spread by *Vansittart* and *Eden* through the press, with the Polish press in particular willingly participating.

In this respect, the British declaration of war on September 3, 1939, represented the failure of Ribbentrop's defensive policy against the British threat of war, but also a prophecy come true. The pro-German forces—insofar as they existed—had not been able to prevail in Britain. Furthermore, Ribbentrop had so far only succeeded in winning Italy, at least one state that England had to take seriously, as an ally for the deterrent coalition he had planned, and even this was only formal and, as it turned out in August 1939, worthless. However, a comprehensive alliance system did not come about, and there were reasons for this, which we will analyze below.

V. Among diplomats alone— Ribbentrop and the Foreign Office

"He said, somewhat disgruntled, that H. v. R(ibbentrop) had let him know that he, R(ibbentrop), considered all diplomats (not only Köster, but also him, F(rançois)-P(oncet)) to be complete idiots."

Bernhard v. Bülow[1]

The interrogation records from July 20 address the Foreign Office complex. The coup plotters criticized Ribbentrop's foreign policy, and one can only agree with them. This criticism has been voiced many times within the Foreign Office itself. When asked who in the Foreign Office was actually opposed to the Führer, Legation Councilor von (---) replied that it would be easier for him to name those who supported the Führer. With some difficulty, he then came up with six names. What a terrible prospect that our foreign and war policies have been conducted for years by men who have no faith in our cause!"

Joseph Goebbels[2]

1. Hitler's "rubbish heap of the e intelligence"

When JvR was appointed minister, Hitler, the head of state and party leader, explained to him that there were four major foreign policy issues that he would have to deal with as minister: the annexation of Austria to the German Reich, the annexation of the Sudetenland, Danzig, and the Memel Territory. These problems, Hitler said, "must now be resolved." Ribbentrop described his role in this project as follows: "My task was to help him solve these problems."([3]) This description can be considered accurate insofar as the new foreign minister had not been appointed by the dictator to formulate an independent policy as a minister. Ribbentrop had clearly outlined what he believed needed to be done at the turn of 1937/38. He had been appointed to achieve clearly defined goals on this basis in accordance with Hitler's instructions, and at no point was he the only foreign policy advisor or representative with whom Hitler worked.

---

[1] Quoted from ADAP, C, III/2, p. 716, December 10, 1934, *Bülow's* notes on a conversation with *François-Poncet. Roland Köster* was ambassador in Paris at the time.

[2] Cf. *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 13, p. 445, entry dated September 9, 1944.

[3] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 124 f., and *Kley,* Entfesselung, p. 39.

thought, even though he apparently held Ribbentrop in high esteem. [4] One of Ribbentrop's constant problems during his tenure was that Hitler obtained some of his foreign policy information from sources that were not accessible to the foreign minister – and often withheld it from him. Nor did the German state's travel diplomacy remain concentrated in the hands of the Foreign Ministry, either during the tenure of the non-National Socialist Konstantin von Neurath or under the leadership of his successor Ribbentrop. Hitler's personal representatives, such as his former company commander and adjutant Wiedemann, or representatives of the NSDAP such as Hermann Göring, often had the dictator's authorization to hold talks with foreign countries. It was not always clear to the foreign minister what these individuals said or when they traveled. Wiedemann, for example, traveled to England in 1938 for talks with the Foreign Ministry there without Ribbentrop, as the minister responsible, having been informed in advance. Rudolf Hess's flight to England in 1941 was also decided and carried out with Hitler's knowledge, bypassing Ribbentrop. In his notes, he complained about the "many government and party officials who all wanted to pursue their own independent foreign policy."[6]

There are relatively few direct statements by Hitler explaining why he chose Ribbentrop as minister and where he saw his strengths and weaknesses. One passage from the "Table Talks" suggests that Ribbentrop and Hitler agreed in their assessment of the German Foreign Ministry as a gathering place for intellectual confusion and bourgeois-aristocratic professional failure:

> "The boss emphasized that before Ribbentrop's time, the Foreign Office in Germany had been a veritable rubbish heap of intelligence. Those who were unsuited to any other profession found refuge there, as did hordes of Jews. The result was that our diplomats were ridiculed in almost every operetta, and when they were dressed in uniforms that had initially been modeled by men of the Waffen-SS and looked fabulous, they themselves looked like operetta characters.

---

[4] This is apparently also the case with the often circulated (and ridiculed) statement that *Ribbentrop* was
"the greatest German foreign policy maker after Bismarck" refers back to *Hitler* himself, who used it in February 1945 in a conversation with *Robert Ley* – only to explain in the next sentence that the situation was not conducive to politics at that time. *Ribbentrop* should therefore not establish any contacts with the West. See *Goebbels,* Diaries, II, vol. 15, p. 293, entry dated February 1, 1945.

[5] *Wiedemann* spoke with Foreign Minister *Halifax* and *Alexander Cadogan*, among others, about the Sudeten problem. He portrayed *Ribbentrop* as someone who was no longer in *Hitler's* favor, which gave the impression that "*Ribbentrop* and the moderates" were losing influence in Germany against the party radicals. See *Harvey*, Diary I,
p. 161 ff., July 11–18, 1938.

[6] See *Ribbentrop,* Memoirs, p. 126. At this point, *Fritz Hesse's* often questionable statements seem *to* be confirmed. According to Hesse, *Ribbentrop* only learned of the plan and *Hitler's* approval after the flight*:* "Imagine, he actually thought it possible that *Hess* could succeed." See *Hesse,* England Reports, p. 246.

> Ribbentrop was absolutely right to insist on a renewal of the Foreign Office. Every member of the Foreign Office working abroad was a representative of the German Reich. If they did something wrong, or even if they simply made a bad impression or acted foolishly, it damaged the Reich. ...
>
> The best Germans, who had proven themselves professionally and also had the appropriate demeanor, should therefore be employed as diplomats in the future."[7]

Such statements could obviously easily be attributed to Hitler, the passionate foreign policy maker, who ultimately had also "not found another profession" and employed a man as foreign minister who, at least in the eyes of some political opponents at home and abroad, also made "a bad impression." These were questions of perspective. Apart from that, they showed that the contempt of many senior officials in the Foreign Office for the government was reciprocated, and that Hitler saw Ribbentrop as the right man to head the Foreign Ministry because he considered him someone who would break with these habits within the office. Both men also shared a complete contempt for the diplomacy of Wilhelmine Germany, which Hitler had expressed in Mein Kampf. During the war, Ribbentrop had met the future Reichswehr chief Seeckt in Constantinople, who at that time was also making sharp accusations against the Foreign Office:

> During the war, our diplomacy failed everywhere and is to blame for the fact that our reputation has not grown stronger despite all our military power. I doubt that we have reached the end of our diplomatic defeats. America should actually spell the end for this profession. Wherever our political work has been successful, it has been purely military work, carried out without and in some cases against the foreign representation. I can tell you the details later, when the whole clique has been reinstated in its family rights and I am out of the picture."(8)

Seeckt also shared Ribbentrop's analysis of English politics, incidentally. As early as 1915, in the midst of the war, he spoke of the "final battle with England, which we cannot be spared," and that America would also participate as an additional enemy in this final battle in a future war.[9] In view of this, the question arose as to what extent it was actually within the scope of German diplomacy to prevent this final battle.

---

[7] Quoted from *Picker*, Tischgespräche, p. 606, recording from July 6, 1942, at noon.

[8] *Seeckt* in a letter to his sister dated April 24, 1916, BA NS R. 13/67, quoted here from *Guske*, Seeckt, p. 21.

[9] Cf. *Guske*, Seeckt, p. 33 f. This was ultimately mirrored on the other side by *Winston Churchill's* view that there had been a "thirty-year war" against Germany since 1914, which *Churchill* apparently first expressed to *Josef Stalin* and Poland'sas an argument for why the Russian forces that had first invaded East Prussia in the summer of 1914 could justify a Soviet claim to northern East Prussia in 1944. Cf. *Jędrzejewicz*, Parliament, II, p. 335 f.

without fighting and capitulating unconditionally. This question was pressing, but Seeckt did not provide a definitive answer. Ribbentrop shared the unease about the existing Foreign Office, whether or not he was significantly influenced by Seeckt on this point. A fundamental change was therefore necessary. Ribbentrop also stylized himself in this regard and took concrete measures, so that this can be seen as a reason for his appointment as foreign minister, without overstating the position, as there are not many other direct and reliably transmitted statements.

As was often the case, a stubborn political conflict between the Foreign Office and the Nazi regime may have made a final decision inevitable in Hitler's eyes. Konstantin von Neurath had never given up trying to undermine Ribbentrop's position with the help of intrigues and public appearances. Hitler complained about this to Ulrich von Hassell as follows:

> "Incidentally, he (Hitler, author's note) explained to me, as on previous occasions, that Neurath was making a big mistake by resisting necessary personnel reforms. Precisely because he valued Neurath as a decent, steadfast man who
> For example, he regretted that Ribbentrop had shown himself to be more resolute than the generals on the issue of armament and that he wanted to consider him a 'representative' representative. He regretted that Ribbentrop did not want Ribbentrop as State Secretary, even though he would be bringing in a skilled man and, above all, a personality who had his, Hitler's, absolute trust.[10]

In the summer of 1936, Hitler wanted to appoint Ribbentrop as State Secretary against Neurath's will, but Ribbentrop preferred the post of ambassador to London on his own initiative. This did nothing to change Neurath's defensive stance. Not only did he sincerely wish for Ribbentrop's mission in London to fail, an attitude that was certainly reinforced by the fact that Neurath himself had failed as ambassador in London. All his attempts since November 1930 to build British goodwill for the foreign policy concerns of the late Weimar Republic had led to only one "lesson"([11]) :that such goodwill did not exist. Another personal reason for Neurath's ongoing dispute with Ribbentrop may have been the latter's acquaintance with Gustav Stresemann, who had proved to be a tenacious opponent of Neurath's career plans until his death in 1929.([12])

---

[10] *Hassell's* notes on several conversations with *Hitler* about fundamental issues, here from the notes on a conversation on September 22, 1935, in *Hitler's* Munich apartment, quoted in *Hassell*, Diaries, p. 225.

[11] According to *Neurath's* biographer *Heineman*. Cf. *Heineman*, Neurath, p. 31.

[12] Cf. *Heineman*, Neurath, p. 37. Possible further motives for *Neurath's* rejection in: *Heineman*, Neurath, p. 126 ff.

Neurath continued to snub Ribbentrop—and thus Hitler himself—on inappropriate occasions, such as during the negotiations with Italy in the fall of 1936, for which Hitler had even summoned Ribbentrop himself from London. Ulrich von Hassell, himself a declared despiser of "Ribbentrop's private shop,"(13)Ribbentrop's office, witnessed this performance at the Obersalzberg. The German embassy in Rome had apparently spread rumors that Ribbentrop's German-English friendship policy was a danger to the German-Italian talks. Neurath had even declared to Ciano in a rather disrespectful tone in front of his own dictator that "even the Führer was ultimately able to recognize how deceptive Ribbentrop's predictions for the future were."[14]Although Ciano correctly understood this as a deliberate attempt to discredit Ribbentrop for highly personal reasons,[15]he decided to support Neurath. This led to a spectacular appearance:

> The very first scene upon entering the house was quite amusing: Ribbentrop, whom Hitler had summoned, was clearly prepared to participate in the Hitler-Ciano meeting when Ciano briefly and emphatically stated that if Ribbentrop were present, he would not say a word. Neurath then suggested to Hitler that he, Neurath, also leave and speak to Ciano alone (with the translator Schmidt). That's what happened, and Ribbentrop stood there like a drowned rat, to the delight of all the evil people"(16)

The delight of all the evil people in this kindergarten boiled down to seeing Ribbentrop, of whom Hitler had a high opinion in foreign policy matters, successfully discredited, contrary to what Neurath tried to believe or portray to his Italian interlocutors. Whether, in this case, the result of letting Hitler speak to Ciano alone could seriously be considered a success was doubtful.[17]Hitler openly

---

[13]*Ulrich von Hassell* describes *Ribbentrop's* apparent first impression in a letter to his wife dated June 23, 1933. In his almost childlike tendency to assign code names to even the most harmless remarks about any person, *Hassell's* letter not only referred to *Hitler* as "Inges Chef" (Inges boss) and *Hassell* himself as "Chr. Augustin" or "Crh. A.," but also, among many others, to a "No. 5": *Joachim von Ribbentrop:* "No. 5, strange private shop, impossible thing in and of itself. Personally friendly and attentive. Chr. A. limited himself to a factual presentation of the situation in his shop." Quoted from *Hassell,* Diaries, p. 36.

[14] Cf. *Ciano*, Papers, p. 53, record of a conversation *between Neurath and Ciano* on October 21, 1936.

[15] The *Ribbentrop-Neurath* duel was common knowledge, *Ciano* noted on October 24, 1936. Any success *Ribbentrop achieved* in London would be a defeat *for Neurath*, who would use "every weapon" at his disposal to prevent this from happening. See *Ciano*, Papers, p. 60.

[16] Quoted in *Hassell*, Diaries, p. 160, entry dated October 31, 1936. *Hassell* went on to note, without comment, that *Ribbentrop* had defended himself against the accusation of being anti-Italian during the conversation *between Hitler and Ciano* on the terrace opposite him.

[17]*Ciano* ultimately reported back to Italy that he had encountered "much less pro-British sentiment" than expected at Wilhelmstraße. *Ribbentrop* was working diligently as ambassador to achieve a major Anglo-German reconciliation, which would then also include Italy, and *Ribbentrop* was also "undoubtedly working seriously" on this. *Neurath* had no confidence in such plans. See ADAP, C, VI/I, Doc. 14, November 6, 1936, Ambassador *Hassell* to AA.

He drew his conclusions from such incidents, and these conclusions increasingly pointed in the direction that the Foreign Office was pursuing a policy without, if not against, him, and that this was due to its leadership. The positions Neurath advocated, for example with regard to territorial revisionism, as he had explained to the cabinet in the Bülow memorandum, did not differ greatly from those expressed by Hitler himself. On the other hand, Neurath's ideas about his own role on the international stage and his ability to influence Hitler in this field, which he claimed as his own, differed significantly from both Hitler's expectations and Ribbentrop's views on this point. Ribbentrop saw himself as a decidedly difficult but loyal advisor with controversial opinions. He did not shy away from open disputes on individual issues and was an exception in this regard in Hitler's circle. However, he then carried out Hitler's decisions as they had been made. There was no other relationship like this in Hitler's inner circle. The National Socialists who had access to Hitler tended to accept his statements and decisions uncritically. If they disagreed, they resorted to delaying tactics or interpreted his decisions as they saw fit. They either did not dare to openly contradict him, or it was completely beyond their horizon. Hitler insisted on Ribbentrop as foreign minister after appointing him once. He therefore shielded him from criticism from others. How he expressed himself in this regard is often only indirectly reported, for example through Albert Speer's post-war statements to the Allies:

> Question: Did Hitler think highly of Ribbentrop's abilities?
>
> Answer: Goebbels was a fierce opponent of Ribbentrop and wanted to push him aside at all costs. He occasionally spoke to A. H. about this during a visit to Obersalzberg – probably in 1944 – and was told that he completely misunderstood him. Ribbentrop was a 'second Bismarck'. This greatly shocked Goebbels, and us no less, when he told us about it."([18]

In fact, Hitler effectively prohibited his supposed "second Bismarck" from leading any German foreign policy at that time, in 1944, because he did not expect any success from it, either through Ribbentrop or anyone else, given the existing war constellation and military situation. In this respect, assuming its authenticity, the statement made to Goebbels was primarily an attempt to suppress any conceivable debate about the succession of foreign policy figures and content in the given situation. Speer was obviously unable to comment on the relationship between Hitler and Ribbentrop from his own observations, but nevertheless stated the following immediately after a leading question from the interrogating officer:

---

[18] *Albert Speer* during interrogation on September 7, 1945, quoted in *Overy*, Interrogations, p. 333.

Question: Was it Ribbentrop's energetic and categorical manner of making decisions that enabled him to bluff Hitler?

Answer: I don't understand that. On the other hand, A. H. repeatedly described Ribbentrop's bad qualities in conversation. By this, however, he meant more the unpleasant way in which Ribbentrop tenaciously defended his point of view and refused to give in, which A. H. found uncomfortable, as he stated. A. H.'s meetings with Ribbentrop therefore often lasted for hours, much to his chagrin, but most of the time they were said to have been about 'questions of jurisdiction,' on which Ribbentrop was extremely sensitive."([19]

It remains unclear whether Hitler's appreciation for Ribbentrop was based precisely on those hours-long conversations in which, without any other witnesses present, he could rely on Ribbentrop as a tenacious discussion partner with different opinions of his own on matters of foreign policy. As mentioned above, this was an exception, as Hitler never engaged in debate in the presence of third parties and his other associates did not tend to contradict him stubbornly. It is interesting to note the difference between the notoriously stubborn Ribbentrop, as consistently portrayed by the statements of the Nazi elite during the interrogations before the Nuremberg trial, and the construction of the spineless "yes-man" Ribbentrop, as the Nuremberg prosecution attempted to portray him during the trial itself.[20] Here, the prosecution's tactic of showering some defendants with inaccurate or irrelevant allegations became apparent.

The new foreign minister's mission was therefore a combination of deterrence and expansion. They would restore Germany to its historical borders under National Socialist auspices and prevent other states from doing so by military means. This had already been the content of a speech given by Hitler in early November of the previous year, which is available in Friedrich Hoßbach's transcript. Since JvR was still serving as ambassador in London and foreign policy multifunctionary at the time, he was not present at this speech, but had traveled to Rome for Italy's admission to the Anti-Comintern Pact. Ultimately, however, he was tasked with implementing the goals outlined at that time, which is why we want to take a look at the content of this transcript, which Hitler is said to have described as his testament. Together with Ribbentrop's ambassadorial report, it represents the central source for the foreign policy intentions pursued by the National Socialists ruling Germany in 1938/39. It followed a combined Ribbentrop-Hitler program.

---

[19] *Albert Speer* during interrogation on September 7, 1945, quoted in *Overy*, Interrogations, p. 333.

[20] As stated in the interrogation by Colonel *Amen* on the witness stand: "In fact, you were a 'yes-man' , weren't you?" See http://docusec.de/text/0736.htm, last accessed on June 26, 2012.

2. The Office, its Organization, and the Minister

> "Never has there been so much shouting and gesticulating as in the Third Reich, but its diplomats were repeatedly instructed to be 'cold as ice' and to present their government's position 'with a stony face'."
>
> Friedrich Sieburg[21]

In 1936, the Foreign Office was reorganized. This measure had no regime-specific background, but rather took into account the criticism that had never completely died down regarding the changes made immediately after the end of the war.[22]Among other things, it was intended to improve the effectiveness of the office by reorganizing its responsibilities. To this end, the country departments and the Special Unit W lost their responsibility for economic affairs and were merged into a single "Political Department." Hans Heinrich Dieckhoff initially took over as its head. The former Group W was given the function of "Trade Policy Department" and, in this context, took over responsibility for economic affairs from the former country departments. Together, these two measures separated economic issues from day-to-day political business, which became easier to manage as a result. This reorganization remained in place even after JvR took over the Foreign Ministry.

Ribbentrop made every effort to ensure that his assumption of office was marked by continuity, at least in terms of style. A confidential report on this matter attested that he had presented himself to his staff in a manner completely contrary to the image that had been formed of him in office:

> "With an inwardly smug attitude, they expected bombastic fireworks. Instead, Ribbentrop displayed a completely calm, composed, and confident demeanor, coupled with astonishing cordiality in tone and gestures during his address to the staff"(23)

This was brought to the minister's attention in several variations and is probably accurate insofar as Ribbentrop deliberately did not want to appear as a new-style National Socialist on this occasion, despite appearing in SS uniform. However, the report also claims that von Neurath and Ribbentrop were politically aligned, which seems rather amusing. The reporter obviously wanted to avoid any possible conflict between the "old" and "new" styles in the Foreign Ministry. This also applied to a large extent to the new minister, who was reluctant to make changes for pragmatic reasons. As he saw it, quick decisions would have to be made in a short period of time, and this would essentially only be possible with the existing staff.

---

[21] Quoted from *Sieburg*, Untergang, p. 27.

[22] Cf. *Stuby*, Gaus, p. 351.

[23]PA AA, R 27157, unsigned confidential report from February 1938.

However, Ribbentrop did give considerable thought to how he could reform the Foreign Ministry. He began with the training of diplomats and, after a few months in office, developed plans for a "training center for young Foreign Ministry staff," which he summarized in a separate memorandum.[24] The new recruits for the Foreign Office, 150 people were planned for the first year,[25] were to be recruited primarily from the Order Castles, SS leadership schools, and National Political Education Institutions. The aim was to create a type of diplomat who would be less distant from the National Socialist state than the Foreign Office of 1938 generally was. To this end, the candidates were to undergo a training program that included both practical work in the Foreign Office (in the mornings) and ideological and political training (in the afternoons). In addition, there was improvement of language skills, but also further training in sports (horse riding, fencing, shooting, and more) and finally two "educational trips" through Germany to establish contact between the future elite and the realities of life and economic and technical reconstruction efforts in Germany. All measures were aimed at the typical National Socialist combination of elitist and egalitarian elements. All suitable persons were to be able to rise to the elite of the new German diplomats. There was to be no more automatic renewal of diplomatic dynasties based on property and nobility, as had been customary in the German Empire and had been partially carried over into the Weimar Republic. In February 1939, Ribbentrop set up a commission to work out the details, which included Weizsäcker, Berber, Etzdorf, and Luther, among others.[26] On October 1, 1939, the training center was supposed to open, but this apparently did not happen due to the outbreak of war.

Even before these activities, Ribbentrop had been thinking about the training of future diplomats and had obtained instructions from Hitler on September 23, 1936, to to "discuss and implement all necessary measures" with the "competent authorities" in order to transform the existing foreign university at the University of Berlin into a "Reich university for the training of future diplomatic personnel."[27] The foreign university to be converted had only borne this name since the previous year, 1935, and had originally been founded by Bismarck in 1887 as a seminar for Oriental languages. According to its own claim, the renaming was intended to signal a change of focus in education, which was to aim at a better understanding of foreign countries. As a general political purpose

---

[24] See the memorandum: Purpose and Objective of the House for Young German Diplomats, October 1938: PA Office Ribbentrop 14/2, Part 2; File OSAF 18/1; PA Reference Files Hewel, Vol. 3, *Ribbentrop* to *Schwerin von Krosigk*, December 18, 1938.

[25] See *Jacobsen*, Foreign Policy, p. 483.

[26] Cf. PA, Luther file, vol. 1, and *Jacobsen*, Außenpolitik, p. 483.

[27] Cf. *Eisfeld*, Angebräunt, p. 139.

It was stated that "the foreign people (should) be understood in terms of their characteristics and circumstances, ... but seen in relation to Germany."[28]

With such ideas, Ribbentrop was able to build on the ideas of the Weimar period, when the German College of Politics worked to educate people who could lead Germany, which was "subject to the will of foreign powers," into a "struggle for national liberation." The
DHfP was to provide the "purification of a political and national sentiment binding on a wide circle of men and women" for such a struggle, demanded the later Federal President Theodor Heuss in a memorandum at the time.[29] The DHfP and the Political College, which collaborated with it, produced employees of the Foreign Office such as Friedrich Berber and Axel Seeberg.[30]

Ribbentrop's personnel policy was part of his efforts to create a position for his office, and thus for himself, that was as difficult to attack as possible within the institutional pluralism of the Nazi state. However, it is probably not wrong to see this attitude in Ribbentrop personally, as well as in the development of this institutional pluralism in general, as an expression of profound differences within the regime, namely differences about what Germany should actually be. There were bound to be constant tensions between Ribbentrop's goal of establishing the German Reich as a classic great power and the simultaneously existing state socialist, anti-Semitic, racist, pan-Germanic, and anti-Slavic currents within the power apparatus and the party. The Foreign Office and the armed forces, as bastions of conservative German national values, complemented the spectrum of rivalries more in line with Ribbentrop's thinking. In this sense, he seems to have calculated when, after his appointment as minister, he not only left the structures of the Foreign Office largely unchanged, but also chose his second-in-command, the state secretary, from among those employees who enjoyed particular prestige there. It turned out to be a mistake of a special kind.

---

[28] *Scurla* memorandum on the restructuring of the foreign university and its expansion into a foreign studies faculty at the University of Berlin, BA KO R 2, vol. 12557, cited here from *Eisfeld*, Angebräunt, p. 140.

[29] Cf. *Heuss*, Memorandum, p. 33 f.

[30] *Seeberg* had headed the Office for Eastern Europe at the Political College since 1929 and was a lecturer at the DHfP, in 1940 at its foreign studies faculty. In 1939, he was transferred by *Ribbentrop* to the interministerial "England Committee," which existed until the end of the war. Cf. *Eisfeld*, Angebräunt, p. 70.

3. The Minister and his State Secretary

Notes on Ernst von Weizsäcker's memoirs and private papers as sources

Against the background just described, it is necessary to take a look at some sources that accuse JvR of pursuing a course of war in 1938 and 1939 and, in some cases, go on to claim that he did not inform Germany's head of state and party leader sufficiently about the danger of an impending war with the two Western powers, England and France. As has already been shown above and will be explained in more detail below, the exact opposite is true. However, while the false impression in the case of the Hoßbach Protocol or the memorandum on the Four-Year Plan arises from inaccurate information about the content of the source, there are a number of claims by former employees regarding Ribbentrop's alleged internal statements. These claims were made primarily by those of Ribbentrop's colleagues in the Foreign Office who had established secret contacts with precisely those potential war opponents and had advised them to take an uncompromising stance toward Germany. Among the sources that accuse Ribbentrop in this context is, for example, the two-volume edition of the "Weizsäcker Papers" published by Leonidas Hill, which has had a decisive influence on the image that contemporary historical research has formed since the 1970s of Weizsäcker – and thus of his boss Ribbentrop.[31] Although there was criticism of the nature of the edition immediately after its publication, this did little to diminish its influence. [32] In places it is a sharp indictment of Ribbentrop, who is practically branded as solely responsible for the war in a note dated September 7, 1939, by Hill:

> When, at noon on August 31, all other attempts to bring in a Polish negotiator had failed (e.g., via H.=H.) the only hope left was our military circles. I told Göring that it was high time for him to come. Were we really obliged to let Hitler's mentally disturbed advisor destroy the Third Reich? R. would be the first to hang, but others would follow."

Witnesses to this appearance or even the choice of words that a state secretary uses in relation to his superior in front of the second man in the state ha-

---

[31] *Leonidas Hill* (ed.): Die Weizsäcker-Papiere 1900–1950, 2 vols., Frankfurt 1974.

[32] *Rainer Blasius,* for example, explicitly refers to this criticism, but does not address its content and instead bases his dissertation on *Weizsäcker's* politics largely on the "Weizsäcker Papers." See *Blasius,* Weizsäcker, p. 5. Critical reviews of the Weizsäcker Papers include those by H. *R. Berghahn (*History 61, 1976, pp. 473 f.), *Peter Krüger (*HZ 222, 1976, p. 756 ff.) and B. *J. Wendt (*Das Parlament, No. 30, July 26, 1975).

[33] Probably referring to *Ulrich von Hassell's* connection to *Nevile Henderson*, the British ambassador.

[34] Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 164.

There is no such thing. They seemed so unbelievable to Weizsäcker himself that he gives a different version in his published "Memoirs." According to this, it was not Göring but Ulrich von Hassell who was his interlocutor, and there was more than one mentally disturbed person:

> "I told Hassell that we were not obliged to plunge into the abyss because of two madmen (Hitler and Ribbentrop). He should also tell Göring, via his sister, that Ribbentrop was the gravedigger of the Reich and describe to him how his Karinhall was in danger of going up in flames."[35]

These are Weizsäcker's variations, which, with "dangling" and "insanity," refer more to the Allied postwar interpretations than to the realities of 1939.[36]At the same time, there is evidence that Weizsäcker, with inaccurate assumptions about Ribbentrop, was working toward a situation in which he hoped to become the preferred contact person for foreign diplomats instead of the foreign minister. This raises the question of how this publication came about and its value for the assessment of specific individual cases. For his work as editor, Hill was able to draw on the family-owned estate of State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker. On this basis, he compiled a mixture of letter quotations, diary-like entries, notes, and drafts by Weizsäcker, including from his time as State Secretary in the Foreign Office during the years 1938/39. According to his own statement, Hill omitted anything that could incriminate the former State Secretary in the sense of the charges brought at the post-war Nuremberg trials: "I did not feel obliged to print the other series of documents which the prosecution believed, and probably still believes, prove his criminal involvement."([37])Furthermore, in his editorial preface, Hill argued for Weizsäcker's complete innocence, including in moral terms. He had made a pact with the devil to prevent a war, but had been unsuccessful. For this reason, the selection of documents had been deliberately limited:

> "Because preventing the outbreak of war by any means and with every possible compromise was at the center of his efforts, the documents that attest to this have been given priority over other documents that do not, regardless of how important these other documents may be in a different context"[(38)]

---

[35] Quoted from *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 259. Later, he also contacted *Göring* himself and spoke of *Ribbentrop's* "dangling," but mental illness is only mentioned in conversation with *Hassell*.

[36] *Weizsäcker* was familiar with *Ulrich von Hassel's* diary, published in 1946, which supported the version of the "Memories" and the "Papers" in parts, but differs considerably in its assessment of the scene. According to *Hassell*, *Weizsäcker* described the *Ribbentrop-Henderson* conversation to him as "unfriendly, but not yet in the form of a break." Only afterwards did *Hitler*, not *Ribbentrop*, "loudly declare that the other side had now blatantly put itself in the wrong." See *Hassell,* Germany, p. 81.

[37] Cf. *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 51.

[38] Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 51.

Hill may have had good reasons for this restriction from his point of view, but it makes it impossible to gain a true picture of Ernst von Weizsäcker's activities from his edition, because under these circumstances it is conceived as a defense of Weizsäcker. It is well known that Weizsäcker worked to escalate political events to a head in order to be able to overcome the Nazi regime politically or even institutionally in the foreign policy crisis that would then arise. In Leonidas Hill's compilation, such evidence does not appear or is given little attention. One example is Weizsäcker's marginal note on a paper dated February 1939 by Hill. Weizsäcker notes there that in December 1938 he recommended to Ribbentrop that "Poland be reduced to a size acceptable to us as a buffer against Russia" by "acquiring Memel and Danzig, as well as a fixed land bridge to East Prussia."[39] This recommendation, if it was indeed made, certainly did not mean "preventing the outbreak of war by all means," but rather promoting it. This occurred at a time when Ribbentrop and Hitler were seeking precisely that "possible compromise" with the Republic of Poland through a German-Polish treaty based on the existing border, which editor Hill mistakenly attributes to Weizsäcker. ([40])

This shortcoming is compounded by others, as editor Hill pursues his goal of defending Weizsäcker by deliberately selecting individual sentences from letters, from which he omits not only other content of a private nature or political content that does not serve his purposes, as he announced he would do. In most cases, he does not even inform the reader of the addressee to whom Weizsäcker wrote the respective letter, nor does he investigate whether the letter was actually sent. ([41]) To answer this question

---

[39] Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 150.

[40]The same document contains *Weizsäcker's* proposal for what could be envisaged in the near future in addition to *Ribbentrop's* recommended course of action against Poland. Among other things: "Ultimatum to Prague: acceptance of a friendship treaty guaranteeing the Czechs all the advantages of external security, internal independence, and cultural autonomy." Contents include: "Foreign representation by the Reich, conversion of the army into internal troops, guarantee of borders, establishment of German enclaves, economic rapprochement with the Reich in accordance with our agreement. ... In case of rejection, occupation of the country by German military forces, otherwise merely (sic) military security of the Slovak-Czech border by German military forces." Quoted from *Hill,* Papers, II, p. 151. This is, down to the choice of words ("cultural autonomy"), exactly what *Hitler* actually presented to Czech President *Hacha* in March 1939 as the Protectorate Treaty. *Weizsäcker* therefore advocated a military presence in Czechoslovakia in any case, if necessary throughout the country, as was actually to happen in March 1939. In his "Retrospective Report" on 1938/39, however, he claims to have found this course of action "unfortunate." Once again, *Ribbentrop* was to blame. He was "unresponsive" to *Weizsäcker's* alleged arguments against occupying Czechoslovakia. See *Hill,* Papers, p. 174.

[41]Only letters to *Weizsäcker's* mother and his wife are clearly marked "BM" and "BF" respectively. The vast majority contain only a "B" for letter as an indication of the nature of the underlying document.

This would be all the more important given that, according to his own statements, Weizsäcker wrote reports and accounts between 1938 and 1943 that were intended to show his actions and intentions in 1938/39 in a favorable light. Hill also included these texts in his edition as "notes" or "retrospective reports" without questioning whether the clearly stated intention might have had an impact on the truthfulness and completeness of the records. On the contrary, he attributes to them "a confirmation of Weizsäcker's activities and the validity of the previous papers."[42] In this part of the edition, it is often unclear when the text in question was written. A loose, undated sheet found in Weizsäcker's papers describing the situation in October 1939 may not have been written at that time, but could have been written years later.

This also applies to that part of Weizsäcker's "papers" which in other cases would normally be a reliable source: his diary entries. A diary notebook, purchased already bound and then filled in chronologically, page by page, without gaps, in the handwriting of a well-known diarist, is usually a reasonably reliable source. Of course, it contains possible errors made by the writer, but at the same time it provides authentic information about how things happened from his point of view. Records of this kind are particularly valuable if they were not written for self-promotion or later recollection, but were intended to serve as a current memory aid, such as the diaries of Chief of Staff Halder.[43]Other otherwise authentic diaries have the flaw of having been deliberately written for later political use, such as the Ciano diary of the Italian foreign minister, which was to play a remarkable role in the trial against Ribbentrop. However, there are also examples of diaries that only appear to meet the above criteria but are not authentic. The most famous worldwide is probably the extensive total forgery of the so-called Hitler diaries, which, given the volume of material, were initially believed to be genuine by numerous well-known historians because they could not imagine the energy of a forger like Konrad Kujau filling dozens of volumes. After all, there was an easily recognizable sign of forgery here, because, as far as is known, Hitler never wrote long texts himself for health reasons, but always dictated them to his staff on a typewriter. Another example of a complete forgery is that of Senior SS and Police Leader Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who forged his own diary from 1941/42 before handing it over to the Federal Archives. ([44]) He had previously achieved a high degree of notoriety with incriminating statements in the post-war Nuremberg trials. Thanks to the nature of his statements, he himself had gone unpunished—even though, as

---

[42] Cf. *Hill*, Papers, p. 516.

[43] *Franz Halder*: War Diary, 3 vols., edited by *H.-A. Jacobsen*, Stuttgart 1962–1964.

[44] Cf. *Breitman*, State Secrets, p. 308.

former head of an SD task force of the SS in the Soviet Union with a past that would have earned anyone else a death sentence.[45]

These are extreme cases. More often, genuine diaries of important contemporary witnesses are kept by their families, who may restrict access to them for research purposes or in collaboration with state institutions, prevent the publication of undesirable entries.[47] However, the handwritten document itself can be recognized as a source that was created at the specified time. Finally, the dangers to which a diary writer could be exposed in times of totalitarianism can also influence the diary as a source. Contents and names may be encrypted. Ulrich von Hassell, long-time German ambassador to the Vatican, kept an extensive diary using relatively transparent pseudonyms, which, despite his precautions, would have posed a great threat to opponents of the German regime, including Ernst von Weizsäcker, if it had been discovered. Walter Hewel, Ribbentrop's colleague and liaison between the Foreign Office and Hitler, on the other hand, kept a regular but extremely sparse diary. For safety's sake, he wrote entries he considered sensitive in a mixture of Indonesian and German gibberish, using additional code names, so that to this day they have not been clearly translated.

These possibilities and observations raise questions regarding Weizsäcker's diary entries in relation to our topic, especially since some of the statements made there about JvR prove to be clearly inaccurate from the perspective of other sources. Here, too, the family monitors and restricts access to the original. The transfer of the letters, transcripts, and copies in his possession to an accessible archive, announced by editor Hill in the foreword, has still not taken place decades later. ([48]) Ernst von Weizsäcker was also not a regular diary writer. Strictly speaking, he did not keep a diary at all. In 1933, he merely made a few entries in a slim notebook. Among some data entries from 1938 and 1939, there are a few more entries in this same notebook, which editor Hill includes in his "papers."

---

[45] *Hermann Göring* is said to have insulted him during the trial as a "swine, a skunk, the bloodiest murderer in the whole damn show," which, according to *Richard Breitman*, "came close to the truth, at least on the last point." See *Breitman*, State Secrets, p. 307.

[46] For example, the privately owned records of the English diplomat and politician *Harold Nicolson*, only a fraction of which have been published.

[47] See the diary of *Alexander Cadogan*, who was *Ernst von Weizsäcker's* British counterpart as Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office from 1938 onwards. All references to the numerous British intelligence operations were deleted without this being indicated in the original edition.

[48] See *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 50.

prints them all in full, noting that they are to be regarded as particularly important. There are no other entries of a similar nature in Weizsäcker's hand; in any case, there is "no indication that he kept a diary that has not been found."(49) It is therefore not far-fetched to conclude that the existing entries should not be classified as records written directly "under the impression of the significance of the time," as Hill does.[50] They could also be interpreted as an expression of Weizsäcker's own attempts at justification, thus cautiously calling their authenticity into question, not because Weizsäcker did not write them himself, but because there is no evidence that they actually date from 1938/39 and/or reflect an immediate impression. The notes cannot be classified as spontaneous simply because they are mostly retrospectives, some of which summarize the events of several days and weeks, and in some cases months. Hill points out that, unlike Hassell, Weizsäcker "was very discreet and reserved and, from 1933 onwards, was aware of the great danger associated with making written notes that could be found by the Gestapo. He only expressed his real opinion to members of his family and a few others, including Ulrich von Hassell."(51)

Whether Weizsäcker truly trusted Hassell, whose reckless belief in the honesty of foreign countries' diplomacy was shared by Weizsäcker's colleague and
It is doubtful whether Weizsäcker really considered his admirer Bernardo Attolicco to be "as stupid as the idea of cadet students." There is much to suggest that Weizsäcker wanted to take on the role of a "second Talleyrand," as Weizsäcker himself attests. Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, legendary at the time as the archetype of the sophisticated diplomat, personified himself in a way that no legitimate institution recognized as being in the best interests of France. The firstborn son of one of France's oldest noble families and a Catholic bishop before 1789, he then took the side of the Revolution and went on to play a decisive role in almost all phases of French politics until his death in 1838, whether the government was republican, consular, dictatorial, Bonapartist-imperial, restorative-royal, or revolutionary-bourgeois-royal. He became particularly well known for his betrayal of France's Emperor Napoleon while serving as his foreign minister, sabotaging the alliance structures Napoleon was striving to establish. Nevertheless, hardly anyone accused Talleyrand of not wanting what was best for France at all times, from his point of view. Against this background, one must not assume that Ernst von Weizsäcker did not want the best for Germany in the sense of a "Greater Germany" when he sabotaged the policies of his superior Joachim von Ribbentrop. He merely attempted to exert influence, which he, as State Secretary and non-

---

49 See *Hill*, Papers, p. 53.
50 Cf. *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 53.
51 Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 52.

National Socialist from his office. The parallel to Talleyrand is not coincidental, but was sought by Weizsäcker himself:

> "I was fascinated to examine how Talleyrand managed to distance himself from his master, according to popular opinion, in order to later betray him. I wanted to know how this classic political deserter ultimately decided it was right to let things take their course and expose France to the external enemy in order to free it from its dictator. ...
>
> In quiet moments overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, I came to the conclusion that Talleyrand's model was only applicable in part, namely: remain in office – yes, shake off the dictator – yes, but by one's own efforts. I would never have approved of it; I would have considered it completely inexcusable to promote catastrophe, to bring about war in order to lose it and thus get rid of Hitler."[52]

The extent to which Weizsäcker's interpretation of Talleyrand's behavior is historically accurate cannot be discussed here. What is important is that, according to his own statement, Weizsäcker adopted "fragments" of Talleyrand's methods and, in doing so, repeatedly took action with the domestic and foreign allies of his "conspiracy", he repeatedly took actions that could probably be classified as high treason or treason. The motive may have been political. Weizsäcker believed he could do more in foreign policy than Ribbentrop, a diplomatic newcomer, and the National Socialists, most of whom had never set foot abroad. In order to assume this role, he sacrificed his superiors, before 1939 and even more so after 1945, when the goal of a "Greater Germany" was suddenly considered a criminal enterprise and Weizsäcker denied ever having pursued it. This is not morally irreproachable, but it is "all too human" and understandable. For our purposes, it is important to consider the secrecy that this strategy required. In other words, Weizsäcker did not entrust his real opinion to paper and instead wrote his papers in such a way that they could be found harmless by investigators. His entries are not spontaneous, never in note form, but carefully designed for a specific purpose, so that they sometimes differ in subtle ways when Weizsäcker describes the same event several times.

Here is an example: On the evening of August 30, 1939, Joachim von Ribbentrop had a memorable meeting with the British ambassador Nevile Henderson. We will go into the details of this encounter later. In any case, Henderson had the thankless task of informing the German foreign minister that the Polish government would not send anyone who could accept a German offer to negotiate. This was contrary to what both the British and Polish governments had promised. In fact, however, the British government had not exerted any influence on the Polish government to keep this mutual promise. Henderson

---

[52] Quoted from *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 197 f.
[53] Cf. *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 178.

Ribbentrop thus arrived empty-handed, while Weizsäcker had with him the 16-point plan that had been drafted specifically for this meeting and which, from the German point of view, was to form the basis for negotiations. Weizsäcker gives two versions of the meeting, one in his "diary" and one in a "note":

> "We are waiting to see whether, as offered, England will persuade Poland to send a negotiator. The answer is not unfavorable, but delaying. We are working out a reasonable compromise plan, the first constructive idea in months – but is it just for show?
>
> At midnight, when Henderson brings the aforementioned answer, Ribbentrop treats him en canaille, according to R's own account. He presents the compromise plan to H., but does not hand it over and says that it is obsolete due to the long delay in the English response.
>
> This means we are once again on the brink of war. R. goes home beaming."[54]

This is the account in the diary according to the edition of the Weizsäcker papers. In his "Memoirs," Weizsäcker adds three more sentences to this entry, apparently to increase its credibility:

> "I myself was desperate. I had briefly attended a conversation between Hitler and Ribbentrop. I now knew for sure that this was war."[55]

However, Weizsäcker wrote another version, which, based on the choice of words, could be interpreted as a later version:

> On August 30, everyone here was waiting to see whether Poland would send an authorized negotiator. The British Embassy, which had been asked to do so late in the evening on August 29, announced at 4 a.m. that it was aware of the technical difficulties involved in bringing a special representative from Warsaw to Berlin on August 30. At 11 a.m., Henderson pleaded with me for an extension. In the afternoon, he wrote a stalling letter to Ribbentrop. It was not until late in the evening that he received instructions to appear before Ribbentrop around midnight. This led to accusations and heated exchanges. Ribbentrop reads Henderson our 'proposals' in German. Henderson wants them in writing because they are long and complicated. Ribbentrop refuses, saying they are 'outdated', and returns to the Reich Chancellery with the joyful satisfaction of having given Henderson a thorough rebuff."([56])

These are two or three versions of an event that ranks among the most discussed events in the run-up to the outbreak of war shortly thereafter. Henderson later claimed—untruthfully—that he did not understand the proposals read out by Ribbentrop, either acoustically or in terms of content. The Polish ambassador Lipski, to whom they were also read out the following morning, made a similar statement.

---

[54] Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 162. Entry in *Weizsäcker's* diary, attributed and dated 30 August 1939 [T] by *Hill*. The edition does not indicate how the date is noted in the original.

[55] Quoted from *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 259.

[56] Quoted from *Hill*, Papers, p. 162. Entry in *Weizsäcker's* notes, attributed and dated by *Hill*.

and were even handed over in writing, whereby he told the British official who delivered them that he had instructions from Warsaw not to take any interest in German proposals because Polish troops, aided by internal unrest in Germany, would soon be marching on Berlin.[57] In view of the above, we are now interested in the source value of the account, because Weizsäcker wrote several descriptions of an event at which he was not present and did not limit himself to describing what he himself had seen. The changes in Weizsäcker's choice of words are clear. While the German proposals are a "reasonable compromise plan" for Weizsäcker in his notebook, in the other version they are ironically referred to in quotation marks as merely "proposals" that are also "long and complicated." However, both texts are so identical in structure, from the expectations in Berlin at the beginning to Ribbentrop's alleged "joyful satisfaction" at the end, that they can be understood as two differently accentuated variants, as two equally conceived attempts at representation, so to speak. The loose-leaf note is subtly more pro-British. The quiet criticism of the English reaction to Berlin's acceptance of its own proposal ("hesitant") is missing there, as is the mention that the English government itself had offered to send a Polish ambassador, whose arrival was now allegedly impossible. In the loose-leaf version, this suddenly fails for seemingly logistical reasons only. Here, instead of a German government that, in the notebook version, takes up an English-Polish commitment and has "reasonable" offers to make, we see a government in the form of Joachim von Ribbentrop that is merely pushy, theatrical, and ultimately unwilling to cooperate.

It is impossible to say with absolute certainty whether one of these accounts is more accurate than the other, or which one took precedence at the time. However, an overview of all of Weizsäcker's entries in the notebook classified by Hill as a diary suggests that these particular notes were not only designed to be found, but also *intended to be* found. There are a total of twenty-eight entries from 1938 and 1939. They begin on March 5, 1938, when Ribbentrop first offered the future state secretary this position, and end with the entry just quoted about the events of August 30, 1939. With one exception, these twenty-eight entries contain hardly the slightest criticism of any person or any measure taken by the regime. Quite the contrary. The person Hitler, for example, who emerges from these accounts, is that of the "dear Führer," who may steer the ship of state somewhat emotionally and with insufficient information, but who is staunchly patriotic and thoroughly willing to compromise.

---

[57] Cf. *Dahlerus*, Versuch, p. 110.

[58] "Anyone who loves the German Reich and the Führer cannot advise war," *Weizsäcker* is said to have given this as "fatherly" advice on May 22, 1938. See *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 128.

The same applies to Mussolini. Hermann Göring is also portrayed positively, while Ribbentrop's predecessor as foreign minister, Konstantin von Neurath, is assessed somewhat less favorably. But the strong man is always Ernst von Weizsäcker. The choice of words he uses there in relation to Ribbentrop, Göring, and even Hitler is characterized by a sense of superiority, and at times by disrespect. He claims to have been responsible for the concept of the "chemical decomposition" of Czechoslovakia, which ultimately prevailed against Ribbentrop's will. He also advises, after the Munich Agreement, to "go after" Poland and leave the Czechs aside, who are either "a thorn in the side" or "scabies under the skin." Ultimately, it was Ribbentrop who, against the "skeptical" Hitler—and against Weizsäcker's advice—steered the country toward war, supported, as is hinted at in two places, by Heinrich Himmler.

The "Ribbentrop" in these records is a caricature. The records themselves exonerate Hitler, Göring, and above all Weizsäcker, who openly advocated for a Greater Germany, including the corridor, to be enforced by war if necessary. This is most likely a calculated representation that would have been admissible in court in 1943, but was concealed in 1945 and later by the defendant Ernst von Weizsäcker for good reasons. In some cases, it deviates significantly from the verifiable statements and actions of Joachim von Ribbentrop in 1938/39. In the context of the European May crisis over the alleged German threat to attack Czechoslovakia, for example, there is one of those particularly curious entries in Ernst von Weizsäcker's "diary." According to this entry, he had a clash with Ribbentrop on May 22, 1938, because Ribbentrop had demanded that the Czechs be provoked in order to have a pretext for attacking Czechoslovakia.[59] But that was precisely on May 22, 1938, when the Czechoslovak Republic, not least at Churchill's own instigation, set out to provoke a war with Germany. It mobilized its own army to forestall an alleged German threat that it knew did not exist and then proudly announced that it had repelled the Germans. This was indeed the loud prelude to the German-Czech crisis of 1938, and there had been no need to provoke the Czech side. Nor was it at all necessary to give Ribbentrop the advice claimed by von Weizsäcker on that day, because he had, on the contrary, formally shouted at the Czech ambassador that Czechoslovakia should *stop* its provocations. In view of this, Foreign Minister Krofta summoned the German envoy Eisenlohr the next day and complained about the statement made by his colleague Ribbentrop the previous day to Czech diplomats in Berlin. "If Czechoslovakia continues to report on German

[59] See *Weizsäcker*, Papers, p. 128 (May 22, 1938).

troop concentrations, this could become a reality," Ribbentrop had said.

In his efforts to create a Greater Germany that included Austria, the Sudetenland, Danzig, Memel, and the Corridor, Weizsäcker may have been closer to the ambitions of the Nazi leadership in 1938/39 than he later wanted to admit. Weizsäcker himself did not think much of his accounts, which were ultimately formulated as "memoirs," because he was aware of how much he had tailored them to suit the Nuremberg prosecution under pressure. Reading his own words gave him little pleasure:

"I must confess that rereading the summer of '39 has rather upset me today. Nuremberg atmosphere"[61]

He could hardly have been any clearer, and yet he still felt it necessary to point out his own caution in his notes in several places in his memoirs. Even his extensive foreign policy memo on what he considered to be the necessary German stance on the Spanish Civil War, written in the winter of 1936/37, had been written with this in mind:

"The memo was worded in such a way that it could, at worst, fall into the wrong German hands – as was the case with almost all my private notes during the Hitler era"[62]

This statement makes it clear how much caution is required when interpreting Weizsäcker's individual entries and notes. However, Weizsäcker expands on this point again in another passage:

"Why was the move (to remove Hitler from power, author's note) that was thwarted by Chamberlain's appearance in September 1938 not repeated in the spring or summer of 1939? My notes provide no information on this. In the summer of 1938 and then again during the war years 1940–42, I often jotted down notes about what moved me as a memory aid. There is little available from the first three quarters of 1939. Of course, I tried to formulate my notes in such a way that they could not compromise me or third parties, and above all, the matter itself"[63]

Noting that Weizsäcker largely excludes the year 1939 as a time for private notes, and that his "Memoirs" nevertheless quote very sparingly and not entirely accurately from notebook entries from 1939, we will end this digression at this point by referring to Weizsäcker's

---

60 Cf. ADAP, D, II, Doc. 177, p. 240.

61 Letter *from Weizsäcker* to his wife dated September 18, 1950, after reading his recently published "Memoirs." Quoted in *Blasius,* Weizsäcker, p. 157.

62 Quoted in *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 138.

63 Quoted from *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 225. A few dozen pages later, there is another admonition to "truth-seeking historians" to take into account the special circumstances of the times when analyzing texts. See *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 264.

Let us give Weizsäcker himself the last word. In his memoirs, he generally advised against the publication of documents from the Nazi era, allegedly also in a conversation with two American historians who asked him about the publication of the later files on German foreign policy:

> Evenprivate notes from this period bore the stamp of concern about the secret police or were even written to deceive them. Irony, one of the best weapons in a dictatorship, is often difficult to distinguish from seriousness. There is a danger that such publications will confuse history rather than clarify it.

This danger does indeed exist, and a significant portion of contemporary historical research has not escaped it. Not only the Gestapo can be "deceived," and it is not the only entity that should be deceived. With this observation, we can move on to consider another person and their records, which played a very significant role in shaping the image that contemporary history has of German foreign policy before 1945.

This other source, which "greatly influences historical research" on Weizsäcker and thus Ribbentrop,[66] is Erich Kordt's books.
"Not from the files" and "Delusion and reality." As an employee of the Foreign Office, Kordt sought to play a significant political role behind the backs of the German government and the foreign minister, and may indeed have done so. In any case, the disinformation he and Weizsäcker conveyed to London in 1939 before the outbreak of war about the situation in Berlin and the necessary harshness towards the Nazi government, which was allegedly both weak and determined to go to war, certainly did not help to defuse the situation. After 1945, he and his brother Theodor, together with Ernst von Weizsäcker, attempted to portray this role in a positive light.[67]These efforts began early in 1948, still under the strict censorship of the Allied military authorities,[68]among other places in the Frankfurt Hefte. There, Erich Kordt himself seized the opportunity to present himself as a member of an anti-Nazi resistance movement and a figure acceptable to Great Britain.

---

[64] Quoted from *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 386.

[65] Memoirs were also partly victims of such deception. *Eugen Gerstenmaier*, himself an employee of the Foreign Office at the time, approvingly quotes *Weizsäcker's* reservations about the use of records from this period. "Manipulated reports were part of the trade at the time," writes *Gerstenmaier,* only to immediately speculate, with reference to the Weizsäcker papers, "that *Ribbentrop* was even more averse to serious peace efforts than Hitler." See *Gerstenmaier,* Lebensbericht, p. 126 f.

[66] See *Blasius*, Weizsäcker, p. 7.

[67] *Rainer Blasius* refers to a transcript in the IfZ Munich that contains both Erich Kordt's comments on Weizsäcker's "Memoirs," which were still in manuscript form at the time, and Weizsäcker's handwritten counter-comments. See *Blasius*, Weizsäcker, p. 6.

[68] "Wahn und Wirklichkeit" was published "under the approval number US-W-1101 of the military government's news control" and consequently served both the sole and collective guilt theories of Germany's wartime enemies. See *Kordt*, Wahn, p. 15 f.

To raise his political profile. This was a role that he and Ernst von Weizsäcker had been clearly denied by his pre-war British interlocutor Robert Vansittart.[69]

Under the impression of the Wilhelmstraße trial, in which Weizsäcker had to answer to an Allied court since 1947, an image of the State Secretary and his group as "seers" emerged, very similar to the self-image that Weizsäcker portrayed of himself in his diary entries. In 1950, Kordt also staged this self-portrayal for himself in Nicht aus den Akten (Not from the Files), in which, as the title suggests, he largely dispensed with verifiable information, thus stamping his memoir as printed rumor in its finished form.[70] Nevertheless, Kordt also became a widely read author, and his influence is evident in many of the scholarly accounts dealing with the outbreak of war. In general, it is not a very edifying undertaking to prove that historians or contemporary witnesses deliberately or negligently spread misinformation. This would be entirely possible in this biography, but as already mentioned, the aim of this study is to overcome the stubborn clichés that Ernst von Weizsäcker already saw emerging successfully in 1949 with little regret:

> "It's strange how 'resistance' literature is becoming almost impossible to ignore. One writer is already copying from another. It's easy to see how historical theses are being shaped. And then the historians are supposed to figure it all out in the end."[71]

The sour irony with which Weizsäcker comments on the "resistance" here, together with his other observations, does indeed suggest that his "resistance" in 1938/39 was primarily directed at individuals and was motivated by his own ambition. Weizsäcker believed he could do better than Ribbentrop or Hitler. He shared the political goal of a Greater German nation state.

---

[69] *Vansittart* accused both *Kordt* and *Weizsäcker* of having revealed to him their own ambitions for German expansion into the East. This is also corroborated by entries *in Weizsäcker's diary*. See *Kordt*, Commentary, p. 1039 ff., published under Military Government Information Control License No. US-W-2010. Under this supervision, the Frankfurter Hefte also contributed early on to the creation of legends in the *Ribbentrop* case, for example *Eugen Kogon,* who published an essay there in 1946 on British European policy in which he made the counterfactual claim that *Ribbentrop*, "according to some statements" by witnesses, had dissuaded *Hitler* from his respect for England and described England as a declining power. See *Kogon,* Europapolitik, p. 660.

([70])Where *Kordt's* assertions could be verified, inaccuracies were found, for example by *Rainer Blasius*. See *Blasius,* Weizsäcker, p. 145 ff. *Theo Sommer* also points out a number of "errors" in the accounts of *Kordt* and *Weizsäcker*, and also that *Kordt* sometimes "put certain views into the mouth" of one person and sometimes into the mouth of another. See *Sommer,* Mächte, p. 118 and p. 193.

[71] *Weizsäcker* to his wife on March 8, 1949, quoted in *Blasius,* Weizsäcker, p. 157.

4. The lawyer and his turn

Ribbentrop's decision not to intervene comprehensively in the affairs of the Foreign Office as the new minister was reflected in personnel continuity, such as the appointment of the obvious candidate Ernst von Weizsäcker as State Secretary, but also in the recourse to long-serving civil servants in other areas. One of his most important colleagues until 1945 was Friedrich Gaus, head of the legal department at the Foreign Office. In this position, Friedrich Wilhelm Gaus played a key role in the legal justification and evaluation of almost all German foreign policy decisions in the 1930s, even before Ribbentrop took office. Like the foreign minister himself, Gaus could hardly have imagined before 1932/33 that he would ever find himself in the awkward position of working for the Foreign Office under a National Socialist government. Almost exactly a quarter of a century earlier, in 1907, Gaus had joined the Foreign Office as a doctor of law and, because of his origins in a farming family, as a social outsider.[72] In the Foreign Office, as elsewhere in Wilhelmine Germany, the nobility led the social and political rankings, albeit under pressure from changes in economic conditions and, within the Foreign Office in particular, from the new demands on foreign policy that had arisen as a result of the explosive growth in the legalization of international relations. The economic and international legal interconnectedness of world politics led to a constant need for legal advice on treaty texts and thus to an increased importance of the Foreign Office's legal department in the day-to-day running of business, which was also reflected in personnel growth. This did little to improve the moral legitimacy of the policies of the imperialist era, but it created the need to give the current political steps at least the appearance of legal justification based on supposedly existing international legal norms or already signed treaties. Gaus made a career for himself and, as head of the legal commission within the German delegation in Versailles in 1919, was able to experience both: the excessive extension of individual legal provisions at a conference with thousands of participants from various states and interest groups reached a previously unimaginable extent in Versailles. On the other hand, precisely because of this dimension, the negotiations in many cases led not to agreement but to the arbitrary provisions of the Treaty of Versailles on border demarcations, trade rights, and, in particular, the unlimited German reparations payments specified in the text of the treaty. Insofar as individual points had not yet been bindingly regulated, Germany would later recognize decisions made. In 1919, The Economist called the entire treaty "more

---

[72] However a large-scale farmer such as *Gaus'* father, with a farm covering fifty hectares, can certainly be described as wealthy, even if *Gerhard Stuby* doubts this. See *Stuby*, Gaus, p. 34.

or less a blank check." [73] Germany was now forced to sign this blank check after all German proposals for negotiation had been rejected without amendment and under the threat of more than just symbolic weapons. International law was at a formal high point and a moral low point at the same time.

Friedrich Gaus witnessed this firsthand, although one can only speculate as to what impression it made on him. In the years that followed, the experiences at Versailles were compounded by the effects of the treaty itself in the form of foreign policy blackmail by the victorious powers, arbitrary occupations of parts of German territory, and a French disarmament control regime that turned out to be a pretext for extensive industrial espionage. The Foreign Office was confronted with all these events, and there is no doubt that the victors' imaginative interpretations of the peace treaty also influenced the methods of German foreign policy. In any case, his career within the Foreign Office progressed rapidly thereafter. He prepared major decisions such as the Rapallo Treaty and the Berlin Treaty with the USSR by issuing legal opinions, and the Locarno Treaty with the Western powers of 1926, with its arbitration provisions and dual status for Germany's eastern and western borders, was often referred to in the Foreign Office as an expression of the "Gaus system."[75]He did not perceive the National Socialists' rise to power as a major turning point. For a long time, relatively little changed in the Foreign Office. The top officials there pursued a foreign policy whose ultimate goals in terms of rearmament, Greater German annexation policy with regard to Austria, and comprehensive border corrections with Poland did not differ from the National Socialist intentions in these areas. At the same time, the Foreign Office believed that it had a better understanding of international relations than the National Socialists, so that a difference remained which could occasionally lead to sabotage of Nazi policy, albeit less out of a spirit of "resistance" than out of a sense of competition and superiority.

Gaus thus remained in his post after 1933 and was still there when Joachim von Ribbentrop became foreign minister and, in collaboration with Gaus, established an "close relationship"[76] with Gaus. This step by Ribbentrop indicates that he was well aware of the difficulties of his lateral entry as head of an authority with such a pronounced elitist consciousness. His decision to appoint Ernst von Weizsäcker as State Secretary and Friedrich Gaus as his close

---

[73] Quoted from *Wüest*, Vertrag, p. 45.

[74] The pretext for the occupation of the Ruhr region by Belgian and French troops was Germany's alleged failure to deliver wooden telegraph poles, which the British delegation described as the worst use of wood since the construction of the Trojan horse. See *Gathorne-Hardy*, Politics, p. 63.

[75] Cf. *Stuby*, Gaus, p. 107 ff.

[76] Cf. *Stuby*, Gaus, p. 340.

personal advisor on legal matters and member of his personal staff, continuity in the Foreign Office was maintained. Gaus, who had exerted considerable influence on the formal details and, through this, also on the content of German foreign policy since 1919, was an ideal advisor for Ribbentrop, who was not a lawyer, and no one in the Foreign Office could doubt his competence. Ribbentrop consequently sought intensive advice from Gaus in the period that followed, both in the run-up to the Munich Agreement and the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, and later during the war. In March 1943, Gaus received a letter of appointment as ambassador for special purposes, signed personally by Hitler. It contained the wording: "At the same time, I assure him of my personal protection."

Opinions differ on the reason for and value of such an award. In any case, it was unusual and could be very effective. [77]As part of the functional elite of the German Empire since the Wilhelmine era, Gaus, like so many others, found himself in the position of serving the National Socialist government from 1933 onwards. Ten years after Hitler came to power, he enjoyed demonstrative trust.

Although this still did not bring him much public attention, he became known throughout Germany as the key witness in the Nuremberg trials. His former colleagues shunned him from then on. He was even publicly attacked as a "whore of the Foreign Office" because, since he went unpunished in Nuremberg and the subsequent trials, he was accused of having bought his freedom by making appropriate statements. This may well be true, although the pressure exerted by the American prosecution undoubtedly met with Gaus's tendency to quickly come to terms with the circumstances and be a valuable servant to the respective decision-makers.

William Donovan, founder and head of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), believed he had identified a similar mentality among many high-ranking German officials and planned to base the Nuremberg trials on such statements made by high-ranking Germans against each other. He entered into a fierce controversy with chief prosecutor Robert Jackson, who wanted to base the trial primarily on documents rather than witnesses. Jackson prevailed. Statements such as those made by Gaus, who spoke in the desired manner about the foreign policy of the Third Reich, remained the exception in the main Nuremberg trial. However, his appearance there contributed in part to Ribbentrop's conviction as jointly responsible for an allegedly unprovoked war of aggression for the purpose of world conquest.

---

[77]*Gerhard Stuby's* comment that *Hitler's* declaration of protection had "merely declaratory significance" and "added nothing" to his civil servant status is not entirely comprehensible, since in Germany in 1943 any official action against *Gaus* could be interpreted *as* an affront to *Hitler* personally and thus faced serious, if not insurmountable, obstacles. See *Stuby,* Gaus, p. 402.

VI. The ultimate goal of a Greater German nation state: The Hitler-Ribbentrop Program 1937/38

1. The Bülow Memorandum of , 1933

To understand and place in historical context Hitler's territorial goals, which the new Foreign Minister Ribbentrop was to realize from 1938 onwards, let us take a look at the foreign policy ideas pursued by the established circles in the Foreign Office during the late Weimar era. In this context, a fundamental memorandum presented by the then State Secretary Bernhard von Bülow in March 1933 is of interest. It dealt generally with "Germany's foreign policy situation."([1]) This situation was serious at the time in that the invasion of German territory by foreign states was a constant threat. France and Poland had seriously considered going to war against Germany in 1932.([2]) With regard to Poland, this corresponded to what Hitler still feared four years later, according to the Hoßbach Memorandum: Poland would exploit any weakness to take offensive action against Germany. In addition, Bülow drafted a catalog of necessary strategies for various political problems. Foreign Minister Neurath addressed these points in detail at a cabinet meeting on April 7, 1933. He based his remarks on Bülow's memorandum.([3])

According to this, Germany's only security against Polish or French attacks in 1933 was based solely on the Locarno Pact, which made it legally difficult for France to take the offensive, and on Poland's fear of the Soviet Union, which could exploit a Polish attack on Germany as an attack on Poland. However, both states had in fact threatened preventive war.[4]Militarily, there was nothing on the German side to counter these plans in the foreseeable future. Bülow had estimated that it would take five years to even begin to

---

[1] See *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 82, and ADAP, C, I, Doc. 142.

[2] See *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 84.

[3] Cf. ADAP, C, I, Doc. 142. The minutes of the cabinet meeting are essentially an abridged version of Bülow's memorandum in the foreign policy section.

[4] See ADAP, C, I, Doc. 142, p. 255 f. In fact, the Moscow leadership was waiting for such an opportunity to attack Poland, but annoyingly, it did not seem to arise.
"Three years ago, we were told that we needed two to three years, then we would invade ourselves," *Semyon Budyonny* said indignantly on the sidelines of a government meeting in the early 1930s. "And now we are asking for five years. Based on what is being said here about our readiness, I believe that with each passing year we will be less and less capable of doing so." Quoted in *Musial,* Angriffskrieg, p. 45 f.

achieve military parity with Poland.[5] Neurath nevertheless mentioned the reacquisition of the Saarland by means of a referendum, which was to be awaited calmly, as a possible long-term territorial revision goal. He expressly renounced Alsace-Lorraine on this occasion. Eupen-Malmedy was to be regained from Belgium, possibly with the help of financial compensation. He also mentioned the "annexation of Austria," which was not to be pursued for the time being, the transfer of the Lithuanian-occupied Memel region to East Prussia, which was also to be kept secret from Lithuania for tactical reasons, and a "total solution" for the reorganization of the eastern border. A special solution for Danzig was to be rejected because Danzig was only part of the corridor problem. What is remarkable about these lengthy remarks is, first of all, the absence of Czechoslovakia and the associated Sudeten German problem as items on the agenda. The Sudeten Germans constituted the largest group under non-German administration under the heading of "Germanism in the ceded territories,"(6)but their specific situation was not considered in detail. What was striking, on the other hand, was the pronounced anti-Polish sentiment that Neurath revealed:

> "An agreement with Poland is neither possible nor desirable. Tensions with Poland must be maintained for the simple reason that the world's interest in a revision of the German-Polish border must not be allowed to wane. It is well known that Poland is toying with the idea of a preventive war because of our territorial demands. Our policy must therefore be conducted with great caution and avoid isolated actions."(7)

As far as methods were concerned, Neurath advocated individual revision in the areas mentioned. He believed that it was not necessary to strive for comprehensive revision in all areas, but rather to resolve each issue individually. This approach was directly inspired by Bülow, who, in his memorandum, had predicted that a series of individual actions would ultimately yield a better overall result than a comprehensive solution with the
"Danger" of a compromise character. [8]However·Bülow had formulated an even more radical position toward Poland: "Only *another* partition of Poland."[9] He obviously envisaged this partition as a division between Germany and the USSR. His own "political stance" towards the Soviet Union had to be positive, regardless of the struggle against communism within Germany. This necessarily meant war against Poland, which is not explicitly stated in the printed manuscript, but is clear from what is said.

If one compares these plans from the spring of 1933 with subsequent German foreign policy and the political reality of 1938, when Ribbentrop took over the Foreign Ministry from Neurath, one can see both...

---

5 See *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 83.
6 See *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 85.
7 Quoted from ADAP, C, I/1, Doc. 142, p. 259.
8 Cf. *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 84.
9 Cf. *Wollstein*, Memorandum, p. 86, emphasis in the original.

differences and similarities in the political concepts of Ribbentrop and Hitler on the one hand and the Foreign Office on the other. As far as the similarities are concerned, Neurath, in view of his own speech in 1933, could not have been fundamentally surprised when Hitler, on
On November 5, 1937, Hitler declared his intention to initiate a phase of active territorial revision in the foreseeable future and, if necessary, to use armed force to achieve this goal. Neurath had already observed surprising "aggressive tendencies" in Hitler as early as 1933, as he testified before the Nuremberg Tribunal. Neurath could only have been surprised by the direction Hitler wanted to take. Instead of a
"total solution" to the revision of the eastern borders, the head of state and party leader spoke on
November 5, 1937, and later by Poland as a formidable opponent whose borders he intended to respect in order to reassure Poland and gain it as an ally in the future. He sought revision only with regard to Danzig, precisely what Neurath and Bülow had expressly ruled out in 1933 as an undesirable "special solution."[10] Soon after Neurath's speech, Hitler took the first step in the opposite direction by concluding a non-aggression pact with Poland instead of maintaining tensions there, as the Foreign Office had expressly desired.

Furthermore, in 1937 Hitler finally set his sights on Austria and Czechoslovakia as targets for territorial revision, entrusting Ribbentrop with the task of implementing this plan. In contrast, in the "East," with Danzig and Memel, the goals were much smaller than those Bülow and Neurath had envisaged in 1933 – Neurath, who, after the partition of Czechoslovakia, was then to become, appropriately enough, the highest German representative in Czech Bohemia and Moravia. In summary, there were considerable similarities between the conservative elites in the Foreign Office and the National Socialist formulation of foreign policy. Both accepted war or the threat of war as a means of politics, both relied on bilateral revision of the Treaty of Versailles on individual issues, and both aimed at a (Greater) German unification in territorial terms, albeit with slightly different emphases. The question of why parts of the German bourgeois-conservative elites in the Foreign Office made themselves available to this policy can be explained simply by the fact that they shared the goals of this foreign policy. This also applied to the resistance circles around

---

[10]It should be mentioned once again that *Ernst von Weizsäcker* also considered it appropriate to leave a recommendation in his private notes directed against *Hitler* and *Ribbentrop's* cautious policy toward Poland. In a paper dated February 1939 by editor *Hill*, *Weizsäcker* notes that in December 1938 he recommended to *Ribbentrop* that "Poland be reduced to a size that suits us as a buffer against Russia" by
"acquiring Memel and Danzig, as well as a fixed land bridge to East Prussia." Quoted in *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 150. Even if the authenticity of Weizsäcker's notes is questionable, this is an indication of a mood in the Foreign Office that was hostile to a Polish compromise.

[11] *Gerhard Stuby* suspects that behind these ambitions of *Bülow* and *Neurath* lay "more far-reaching intentions" that "did not exclude Wilhelmine-style plans for world domination."

Goerdeler, who in their planned government declaration wanted to "guarantee the existence, independence, vitality, and security of the German Reich and people and essentially restore the old Reich border with Poland."([12])Even the assassins of July 20, 1944, demanded a considerable portion of pre-war Poland in their foreign policy program. However, these very goals of a united German state clashed with opposing expansionist intentions developed in Slavic countries. As early as the mid-19th century, the term "Panslavism" indicated that these intentions could lead to the complete destruction of German settlement areas.

A hundred years later, this idea was revisited, as preparations in Moscow for an impending conflict with Germany included new editions of Karl Marx's German-language writings. In 1941, among other works, Herr Vogt was published, his polemic against the German scientist, politician, journalist, and French secret agent Carl Vogt[13], which in places was downright German nationalist, since the countries represented by Vogt, France and Russia, were considered by Marx at the time to be the strongholds of reaction as Bonapartist and tsarist autocracies. But it was not just about the possible restoration of feudal rule and Bonapartism in Germany. Marx was outraged by the associated attack on national life itself. Vogt had not shied away from proposing the Rhine border for France and, in addition, a wide expansion to the west for Russia. The geographical linchpin for him was the supposedly purely Slavic identity of Bohemia and Moravia. Marx poured all his considerable scorn on the plans that developed from this, which left little of Germany standing, namely roughly what actually remained in 1945:

> For the Russian pan-Slavist Vogt, who has Bohemia at his disposal, there can be no question as to where the natural border of the Slavic empire lies. It runs from Meseritz directly to Lieberose, from there south of the Elbe river's breakthrough through the Bohemian border mountains, and continues along the western and southern borders of Bohemia and Moravia. Everything further east is Slavic; the few German enclaves and other intruders on Slavic territory can no longer stand in the way of the development of the great Slavic whole; in any case, they have no right to be where they are. Once this 'Pan-Slavic state' has been established, it will become apparent that a similar rectification of borders is necessary in the south. ...

ßen." There is no evidence for this. Furthermore, the idea that a Germany within the historical and ethnic borders of the Old Empire would have wanted or been able to exercise "world domination" has become more familiar through constant repetition, but it is by no means realistic. Cf. *Stuby*, Gaus, p. 320.

[12] Quoted from *Hassell*, Deutschland, p. 381.

[13] *Carl Vogt*, 1817–1895, biologist, 1848 representative for Giessen, radical democrat, professor in Geneva since 1852.

> We Germans are losing nothing but East and West Prussia, Silesia, parts of Brandenburg and Saxony, all of Bohemia, Moravia, and the rest of Austria (sic) except Tyrol (part of which falls under the Italian 'nationality principle') in this operation – and our national existence into the bargain!"[14]

From the perspective of 1945, one could almost attribute prophetic qualities to Marx, so similar are the borders he sketched as a vision of horror to those that were actually drawn at the time. In fact, however, these lines once again reveal the decades of ideological preparation for the war of annihilation against the German state and against the German settlement structure that had existed for centuries since the mid-19th century. The idea that Germans east of the borders mentioned by Marx had "no right" to these ambitions was one of the constant themes of Pan-Slavic agitation since that time. The wars between 1914 and 1945 were intended to decide these questions in line with these aggressive ideas. If Germany could not assert itself as what it should be territorially according to Hitler's proclaimed program, namely Germany within the borders of 1860, when Marx published his polemic against Vogt, then this would mean the total loss of German existence as it had been known until then. Wherever the various dogmas of border demarcation could be used journalistically or politically against the German settlement area, they were used alternately, either as a "natural border" (Brenner, Rhine), as an "ethnic border" (Sorbs-Wends), or as redress for historical misdevelopments (Oder-Neisse, Bohemia, Moravia), or as an acceptable historical fact (Alsace). Taken together, this meant the end of Germany as it had existed until then.

2. Ribbentrop's assessment and forecast

> "The British guarantee to Poland issued on March 31, 1939, was an unparalleled bluff. This marked the beginning of a dangerous game of acquiring allies through diplomatic and economic means instead of building a powerful but costly army. The guarantee to Poland did not serve the security of that country, but rather its certain doom in the first half of September. This is not to say that Great Britain should be held primarily responsible for the outbreak of World War II. That was undoubtedly preprogrammed by Hitler's Lebensraum strategy. But London played a decisive role in the circumstances that led to its outbreak."
>
> Lothar Kettenacker[15]

When Ribbentrop returned to Germany in December 1937, he concluded in a personal report to Hitler that England was planning a war of aggression against the German Reich, which would "sooner or later" in any case

---

[14] Quoted from *Marx*, Vogt, p. 130 f.

[15] Quoted from *Kettenacker*, Diplomatie, p. 250, in: Benz (ed.) "Sommer 1939" Stuttgart 1979.

would take place as soon as armaments and alliances were in place. The conclusions he drew in a paper written specifically and exclusively for Hitler were clear:

> "Every day in the future—no matter what tactical interludes of understanding with us might be attempted—on which our political considerations were not fundamentally determined by the idea of England as our most dangerous enemy would be a gain for our enemies."(16)

Years later, after the outbreak of war in 1939 and in the post-war period, the future foreign minister, who had predicted an English attack on Germany here at the turn of 1937/38, was often denounced as the one who had allegedly described England as weak and completely incapable of war. This was by no means the case, and not only on this occasion. Ribbentrop explained to Hitler in detail the domestic political situation in England as he saw it, describing England as a strong, possibly unprovoked, and determined opponent. His "Main Report London A 5522" of December 28, 1937, was considered lost for several decades after 1945. When it reappeared(17), it significantly expanded the information available about the policies of the future foreign minister. However, the tendency of contemporary historical research to regard the mutual copying of old prejudices as an expression of research discourse prevented the new information from becoming standard knowledge. This is regrettable, because the report allows a number of conclusions to be drawn about Ribbentrop's understanding of politics and about the motives of Hitler, who appointed him foreign minister a few weeks later.

In this text, which he sent to both the head of state and his superior, Foreign Minister Neurath, Ribbentrop began by putting himself in the British position. He outlined the various threats from the perspective of the British Isles and ultimately came to the initial conclusion that all countries west of the German border were an indispensable part of the English security system. Due to its geographical location, unlike Italy and Japan, Germany alone had the ability to threaten the "heart of the British Empire," i.e., the islands.Currently, London felt threatened by all three countries, albeit in different ways, and was therefore arming itself with a

---

16 See IMT, Vol. XXXIX, Doc. 075 TC.

17 First published in full in 1974 in *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 61 ff. In 1994, the only known "copy for the envoy" was returned by the Foreign Office to the Foreign Ministry, where it was filed together with the long-known
"conclusions" from this report as PA AA R 28895a. No other political files from the German Embassy in London have been preserved for the years 1937/38, nor have the copies for the head of state and the Reich Foreign Minister.

18 Cf. PA-AA R 28895a, p. 3.

"*massive* armament program." [19]As a concession to Germany, the most pro-German circles might be inclined

– return some colonies

– leave the Austrian question open (or allow it to *remain* open)

– improve the situation of the Sudeten Germans

in return for

– German non-aggression guarantees towards all neighboring states

– Resolution of further problems exclusively through negotiation

– Arms limitation.

This was the maximum concession Ribbentrop believed he could make, even though he himself no longer really wanted to classify Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the future head of foreign affairs, Lord Halifax, as belonging to this faction of peace advocates. Perhaps Halifax's trip to Germany, which Chamberlain had approved the previous month and during which he had also met Hitler, had been merely an "alibi."[20] This apparently had a long-term impact on Hitler's view of Chamberlain, who was still able to rage about his allegedly feigned willingness to compromise during the Czechoslovakia crisis in his last dictations in 1945:

> "During the Munich days, it became clear to me that the enemies of the Third Reich wanted our heads at any cost and that there was no basis for negotiation with them. When the plutocratic bourgeois Chamberlain condescended to fly to the Berghof with his peaceful and deceptive umbrella to confer with an upstart named Hitler, he already knew that England would one day declare war on us. He was prepared to promise me the moon in order to lull me into a false sense of security. His sudden desire to travel was solely about gaining time"([21])

This was Hitler's interpretation of what Chamberlain had actually wanted in Germany in 1938. It is shared by the majority of researchers in view of the time Chamberlain gained, but more on that later. For the

---

[19] See PA-AA R 28895a, p. 4.

[20] See PA-AA R 28895a, p. 11.

[21]Quoted from *Trevor-Roper,* Diktate, p. 99, *Hitler's* statement of February 21, 1945. *Trevor-Roper's* foreword to the dictations is an example of the well-trodden paths and contradictions of contemporary historiography. Not only does he attest that *Hermann Rauschning's* falsified "Conversations with Hitler" are undoubtedly genuine. (p. 19). At the same time, he presents *Hitler* as a failed would-be "world conqueror," the very same *Hitler* who, a few pages later in the Bormann dictations published by *Trevor-Roper*, speculates whether a tougher stance in 1938 might have prevented a world war altogether and sees this as his decisive mistake.

In any case, according to Ribbentrop's view formulated in 1937, the label "nation of shopkeepers" had never been accurate for the English ruling class in general, just as Chamberlain was often labeled an alleged "shopkeeper." This was true at most insofar as Chamberlain, who started out as a merchant—and in this respect was not unlike Ribbentrop—believed in the possibility of power-political compromises and not in the insurmountability of ideological differences. In Ribbentrop's view, this was by no means a weakness:

> "The English leadership, today as in the past, will ultimately go to extremes, i.e., to war, to defend both its significant material interests and its position of power in the world, as long as there is a chance of winning. England will never recklessly risk such a venture. It will always carefully weigh the balance of power and, if necessary, delay decisions. Once the odds are in England's favor, it will fight"([22])

According to Ribbentrop, the compromise group, which had not been specified in detail previously, was therefore also opposed by a wide range of "unconditional opponents," including
"ultra-conservative circles, ... conservatives and liberals of all shades, ... the trade union leadership of the Labour Party, ... hostile Jewry, some Freemasons and churches, (and) perhaps most significantly, traditional opponents in the British Foreign Office."[23] They were joined by Germany's conditional friends, who desired an understanding and, according to Ribbentrop, did not consider it "fundamentally impossible." Here Ribbentrop named several individuals, including Lord Buxton and Lord Allen of Hurtwood, both members of the House of Lords, who, in his opinion, were acting out of idealism. They had been recommended to him by Fritz Berber as members of his "group" in England, which had its religious roots in the Quaker movement. In fact, Allen of Hurtwood occasionally publicly opposed the agitation of Henry Wickham Steed's Focus Circle in the following period.[24]During the Czechoslovak crisis in the summer of 1938, he traveled to Berlin, where he met with Ribbentrop and together with him worked out a proposal for a four-power conference to resolve the situation.[25] But Lord Lothian, who later became the British ambassador in Washington, was also among those Ribbentrop considered willing to reach an understanding in this final report.

---

[22] Quoted from PA-AA R 28895a, p. 6 f.

[23] Cf. PA-AA R 28895a, p. 7.

[24] As in a duel of letters to the editor in The Times in the summer of 1938. After *Steed* had demanded "permanent borders," specifically Germany's renunciation of border corrections vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia, *Hurtwood* described changing borders as the natural course of history. Cf. Times of June 4, 1938 (letter to the editor from Steed) and June 8, 1938 (letter to the editor from Hurtwood), as well as *Franke,* London, p. 353 f.

[25]See *Hughes,* Friend, p. 151. *Allen of Hurtwood* then traveled on to Prague, where he held talks with the Czech government and Sudeten German officials in an attempt to find a compromise solution. This was to be his last political activity. A few weeks after the trip, he died in a Swiss sanatorium. See ibid. *Hughes,* Friend, p. 151.

Ribbentrop later stuck to this assessment. In fact, after the victory in France in 1940, the German peace proposals were sent to Washington, drafted with the assistance of Berber and delivered in the US by a Quaker named Malcolm Lovell. Lothian found the proposals "extremely satisfactory," but by then the "unconditional" war party had gained the upper hand in England in the form of the new Prime Minister Churchill.

At the turn of the year 1937/38, the decision on this matter was drawing nearer. In his report, which for reasons not yet apparent was to be his final report as ambassador, Joachim von Ribbentrop supported Hitler's vision insofar as it related to the immediate goals of Germany's territorial reorganization desires. According to this, the status quo in Central Europe could not remain as it was, and warlike entanglements could not be ruled out in the event of change. (Greater) German nationalism was worth this risk to both of them. Among other things, this would have an impact on German-English relations, Ribbentrop noted in his concluding remarks in his final report as ambassador:

> "With the realization that Germany does not want to be bound by the status quo in Central Europe and that armed conflict in Europe is possible sooner or later, the hope for an understanding among pro-German English politicians—insofar as they are not currently just playing an assigned role—is gradually fading."[26]

In general, it is clear from this and the following remarks that, in Ribbentrop's view, the four main points of the National Socialist revision program made war possible. "A change in the status quo in the East in Germany's favor can only be achieved by force," he stated. ([27] This referred primarily to the revisions regarding Czechoslovakia that Hitler had addressed a few weeks earlier in the Hoßbach meeting, which could prompt France to intervene and would likely draw England into the war. Hitler wanted to enforce such revisions with regard to Czechoslovakia or Austria even without a major European war, but possibly with force against the states mentioned. In Ribbentrop's view, this did not have to and should not lead to a major European war, but he cited a close alliance between the anti-Comintern group consisting of Germany, Italy, and Japan as a prerequisite for this goal. The

---

[26] Quoted from ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 133/133, January 2, 1938. A few days later, *Ernst von Weizsäcker*, who was still Ministerial Director at the time, made a remarkably similar statement on this point, rejecting French attempts to "use German colonial demands to negotiate obligations for Germany that would restrict its freedom of action in Central Europe." See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 96, p. 140, *Weizsäcker* to *Papen*, January 10, 1938.

[27] See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 133, January 2, 1938.

English policy would only be deterred from a war against Germany if such an alliance created the corresponding countervailing power:

"If England, with its alliances, is in a stronger position than Germany and its friends, it will, in my opinion, always prevail sooner or later. If, on the other hand, Germany succeeds in shaping its alliance policy in such a way that a German constellation is stronger than or perhaps equal to an English one, it is possible that England would prefer to seek a compromise after all."[28]

War, whether comprehensive or locally limited, was a constant possibility for both sides. On the other side, Ribbentrop also took readiness for war for granted, partly as a consequence of mutual mistrust: "They (i.e. the English, author's note) believe National Socialist Germany capable of anything, just as we believe the English capable of anything."[29] It was still possible to build trust, but Ribbentrop did not really believe in it:

"One could imagine that an English prime minister, if he were not gripped by the psychosis of German strength and German will to power, but fundamentally believed in the possibility of a German-English friendship, would still be willing to seek a generous, sober compromise that would satisfy German aspirations without jeopardizing vital, purely English interests."

However, Ribbentrop did not see such a prime minister on the horizon. He believed that the current British Prime Minister, Chamberlain, was too constrained by domestic politics. At that time, at the turn of 1937/38, the "psychosis of German strength" had indeed reached considerable proportions among the British public.[31] People were talking about the risks of a possible attack on Germany. [32] As far as Chamberlain was concerned, Ribbentrop saw him, in the context of the concerns expressed above, as a businessman who was literally capable of anything, as ready for war as he was for peace. According to him, one could

---

[28] Quoted from ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 135, January 2, 1938.

[29] Quoted from ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 136, January 2, 1938.

[30] Quoted from ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 135.

[31] *Ribbentrop* appended to his "Conclusions" from the main report a letter *from Lord Londonderry* dated December 1937, which also spoke of a "strong anti-German campaign in England," but declared it "justified" because Germany's ultimate goals were unclear: "If we are unable to reach any agreement on the limitation of German aims by then (i.e., 1939, author's note), I see no other possibility than a repeat of 1914." See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 104, *Londonderry's* letter to a Mr. *Gall.* He wanted to tell the German ambassador, *Ribbentrop,* this soon, and probably did so, since *Ribbentrop* mentions this attitude as an example of how "Germany wants to shape its future differently than England is prepared to grant us in a union with Germany." See ADAP, D, I, Doc. 93, p. 135. ([32])In mid-November 1937, *Harold Nicolson* had long discussions on this matter with his parliamentary colleagues *Winston Churchill* and his son-in-law *Duncan Sandys.* There was uncertainty about their own strength: "We know, of course, that we cannot fight Germany, Italy, and Japan at the same time. However, we do not know whether an attack on Germany would be disastrous for us." See *Nicolson,* Diaries, p. 261, entry dated November 18, 1937.

On the one hand, they believed that Chamberlain wanted genuine understanding with Germany, along the lines pursued by his father Joseph Chamberlain. On the other hand, they believed that Chamberlain was completely sober and unsentimental. It could be that he was just playing for time and betting on "the year 1939," which was often heard and read about here as "the year in which England will be able to take a stronger stance."(33) This necessitated a certain urgency if the goals proclaimed by Hitler at the end of November 1937 were to be achieved.

3. Hitler's ultimate goals: The Hoßbach- Protocol

> "Prussia must gather its strength and hold fast to the favorable moment, which has already been missed several times; Prussia's borders under the Vienna Treaties are not conducive to a healthy state; the great questions of the day will not be decided by speeches and majority votes—that was the mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood."
>
> Otto von Bismarck[34]

On November 5, 1937, Hitler gathered the inner circle of German military and political leaders to present the results of his deliberations on Germany's military, economic, and foreign policy situation. Among those present was Ribbentrop's predecessor, Konstantin von Neurath, who was still foreign minister at the time. Also present were representatives of the three branches of the armed forces and Hermann Göring in his dual role as head of the Luftwaffe and commissioner for the Four-Year Plan. It was a personal "testament"(35)that was intended to provide his successors with a framework for their policies, but it also described the objectives he set for the new minister Ribbentrop a few weeks later. It was to be valid for one to three generations; no one could "naturally" foresee the longer term. This is how it is described in the record known as the Hoßbach Protocol or Hoßbach Transcript, which Colonel Hoßbach, who was present, drew up five days after the conference. Only copies of transcripts of the original text have survived, and the authenticity of these copies has always been disputed. Both author Friedrich

---

33 See *Ribbentrop's* main report in: PA-AA R 28895a, p. 12.

34 Quoted from *Bismarck*, Speeches, vol. 10, p. 139 f.

35 During the Nuremberg trials, *Hermann Göring* mainly denied that this term had been used, while according to his statement, a whole series of other points in the document corresponded to what *Hitler* had repeatedly said. See IMT, IX,
p. 344 f. Similar statements were made by Grand Admiral *Raeder*, IMT, XIV, p. 43 ff. and the then Foreign Minister *Neurath*, IMT, XVI, p. 705 ff. According to their statements, *Hitler's* ambitions were indeed directed toward the acquisition of Austria and the western part of Czechoslovakia, i.e., Bohemia and Moravia. *Raeder* clarified that there had only been talk of the "Sudetenland," which would be consistent with *Joachim von Ribbentrop's* statements about the tasks that *Hitler* had assigned him. See IMT, XIV, p. 45.

Both Hoßbach himself and Hitler's adjutant Nicolaus von Below, to whom Hoßbach had shown the original in 1937, testified to this point after 1945. Both stated that although the copy in question correctly reflected Hitler's basic ideas, to their recollection it was *not* identical in parts to the text they had written and read in 1937.[36] This must be emphasized because historians, insofar as they write for the public in major media outlets, often explicitly adhere to the false claim to the contrary. [37] On the other hand, this raises the as yet unanswerable question of when the document was altered and who was responsible for doing so. As with numerous key documents on Nazi foreign policy, this ultimately results in an overall picture of both uncertain tradition and possible manipulation. The source value of the document therefore lies in its general content, which has been confirmed by witnesses, and not in the exaggerated formulations that are unfortunately often preferred in journalism and historiography.

Nevertheless, the Hoßbach Protocol, as an alleged roadmap to world domination, is, in a sense, at the core of what scholars and laypeople believe they know about the objectives of Nazi foreign policy in 1938 and 1939. There are reasons for this. After 1945, the content of this speech gave rise to extensive debate, during which it was often misrepresented beyond its aforementioned limits of evidential value. Churchill's fabricated claims about the content of the speech have already been briefly mentioned above:

> "On November 5, 1937, he (i.e., Hitler, author's note) outlined his future intentions to the commanders of his armed forces. Germany needed more 'living space'. This was best to be found in Eastern Europe – in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. This goal required a major war and, incidentally, the extermination of the population living in those areas"(38)

In fact, the Hoßbach Protocol contains no mention of any of this, neither of conquests in the East nor of the extermination of the population there. Nevertheless, under the repeated influence of false information of the Churchillian kind, the view spread that plans for conquest had been formulated here for "living space in the East," which, as mentioned above, is not mentioned in the text. This impression was repeatedly created. This often happened with false information in

---

[36]The Hoßbach transcript was apparently introduced into the Nuremberg trial without *Hoßbach* first being questioned about its content. In a series of later interrogations by the Allies, *Hoßbach* stated *that* the text was "in summa" genuine, but that he could not guarantee the authenticity of the wording from memory and that he could not recognize some parts as his transcript at all. See *Hoßbach's* affidavit of June 18, 1946, Nuremberg Document OKW-210, in: IMT, XLII, p. 228 ff.

[37] Most recently *Sven Felix Kellerhoff* in Die Welt on September 1, 2009, where he described the Hoßbach transcript as "undoubtedly genuine."

[38] Quoted from *Churchill*, The Second World War, I/1, p. 319.

Memoirs, as was the case with Churchill, but also in specialist literature. The standard of disinformation thus created was then exacerbated by the inclusion of this false information in popular non-fiction books. Contributors to this included Joachim Fest's biography of Hitler[39] and Henry Kissinger's widely read treatise on international diplomacy as the "reason of nations."[40] This list could be expanded considerably. The handling of the Hoßbach Protocol is a prime example of the shortcomings of international contemporary historical research. On the other hand, it is regularly overlooked that the Hoßbach speech reveals the precisely limited scope of Hitler's goals. In fact, he once again explained in detail his opinion that Germany's problem was a lack of living space. The economy could not become self-sufficient in the current space, and food supplies could not be guaranteed:

> "Germany's future therefore depends exclusively on solving the space shortage, and such a solution can naturally only be sought for a foreseeable period of time, covering approximately 1-3 generations."[41]

On that day, he also gave precise answers as to where this space should be located, what time frame Hitler was working with, and how he viewed his own role in the process. Both the food supply areas and

> "the raw material areas should be sought in close proximity to the Reich in Europe and not overseas, whereby the solution must have an effect for one or two generations. Anything beyond that must be left to subsequent generations. The development of large world structures is a slow process (sic), and the German people, with their strong racial core, find the most favorable conditions for this *in the middle of the European continent*."[42]

Germany's space problem was therefore to be solved, at least for the next few decades, by expansion *in the heart of Europe*. According to the Hoßbach Protocol, Hitler explained his specific thinking on this matter as follows. The annexation of Austria and "Czechoslovakia" (not Czechoslovakia) would make it possible to feed an additional 5–6 million people and would add twelve divisions to the army. According to his calculations, this would have saved at least ten years, as he also anticipated a birth surplus of 500,000 people per year. [43] The content of this passage

---

[39] *Fest* attests that *Hitler* announced the "establishment of a spatially closed great world empire" on November 5, 1937. See *Fest,* Hitler, p. 696. *Hitler* described the annexation of Austria as the "beginning" of the creation of a "base for far-reaching imperial objectives." See *Fest,* Hitler, p. 743.

[40] *Henry Kissinger* claims, as popularly as it is untruthfully, that according to the Hossbach Protocol, *Hitler* proclaimed "the conquest of large areas of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for the purpose of colonization." See *Kissinger*, Reason, p. 337.

[41] ADAP, Series D, Vol. I, Doc. 13, p. 26.

[42] Ibid., p. 27.

[43] Ibid., p. 26.

Independent confirmation of this can be found in the notes of Colonel General Beck, to whom Hoßbach had given the text for his information. Beck commented:

> "Czechoslovakia and Austria as surplus countries are likely to be overestimated (see appendix) – but even in the best case scenario, there would only be a relatively small improvement in our food and raw material potential. ...
>
> The advisability of settling the Czech case (and possibly also Austria) when the opportunity arises, and of considering and making preparations for this within the limits of what is possible, is not disputed.
>
> However, the considerations made regarding the prerequisites for such an opportunity require a much more thorough and comprehensive examination than can be gleaned from the transcript."[44]

Incidentally, this record also proves that there was no talk of "living space in the East," but rather of considerably more immediate and limited goals, which even a critic of the regime such as Beck did not consider illegitimate or unattainable, but merely insufficiently prepared for in political and military terms. At the same time, Beck doubted the historical analogies that Hitler had used to justify his actions. Bismarck's wars against Austria and France had not been as "unprecedentedly risky" as Hitler had claimed.[45]His much-quoted argument that day, that the only solution to the space problem was through violence, echoed Bismarck's famous dictum of "blood and iron," which he believed was the only way to resolve the German question. This was a view that could be doubted with good reason, but it was neither new nor entirely isolated in German military circles, despite their lack of belligerence. Chief of Staff Beck seemed to share it in principle and, in his commentary on the Hoßbach transcript, spoke with respect about Bismarck's statesmanship. His wars were "perhaps the best prepared by any statesman, and therefore successful."No victor believes in chance, as Friedrich Nietzsche once aptly observed.

At the same time, Hitler outlined Germany's sphere of influence outside Germany. His initial priority was to establish a common border with Hungary. Once this had been achieved, he believed that another useful consequence would be that "Poland could be counted on to remain neutral in any German-French conflict."[47]This hinted at Poland's current role as a constant threat, because a significant reorientation of Polish foreign policy would be necessary to ensure its "neutrality" toward Germany. For the time being, Hitler repeatedly expressed caution toward Poland.

---

[44] Cf. Beck estate BA-MA N 28/4, quoted here from *Kluge*, Protocol, p. 146.
[45] Cf. Beck estate BA-MA N 28/4, quoted here from *Kluge*, Protocol, p. 145.
[46] Cf. Beck estate BA-MA N 28/4, cited here from *Kluge*, Protocol, p. 145.
[47] ADAP, Series D, Vol. I, Doc., p. 30.

On this very day, November 5, 1937, he had personally signed a German-Polish declaration on the mutual protection of the respective minorities. This did not change Poland's efforts to virtually wipe out the German minority through economic and political pressure. On the contrary, these efforts were intensified in the following months. If Germany were to encounter difficulties in its foreign policy, eastern Germany would probably also face open war, according to Hitler:

> "Our agreements with Poland remained valid only as long as Germany's strength remained unshaken; in the event of German setbacks, Poland's actions against East Prussia, and perhaps also against Pomerania and Silesia, would have to be taken into account."(48)

These fears were entirely in line with the intentions of the Polish leadership. In Warsaw, it had become fashionable to talk about the acquisition of "all of East Prussia, Silesia, and even Pomerania."[49] A large number of publications by Polish politicians and military leaders expressed this goal more and more openly,[50] until finally, in the spring of 1939, the National Democracy publicly called for the conquest of Germany up to the Oder-Neisse line.[51] According to Hitler's Hoßbach lecture, German concerns about such a development should therefore, after reunification with Austria and the takeover of "Czechs" were a thing of the past. This analysis determined Hitler's attitude toward Poland even after the Munich Agreement. At that point, Poland was to be won over as an ally, but the failure of Poland to cooperate as predicted irritated and convinced him, as it did Ribbentrop, of the continuing danger posed by the country. In any case, on November 5, 1937, he did not give the order to attack Poland; he feared a Polish attack.

Despite errors in assessing Italy's strength and the likelihood of war in the Mediterranean, Hitler's speech captured the situation that led to Munich. "In essence, the Führer believed that it was highly probable that England, and probably France as well, would

---

48 Ibid., p. 30.

49 Quoted from *Burckhardt*, Mission, p. 156 f.

50 A book by Polish General Staff officer *Baginski* from 1927, in which such ideas were publicly expressed, was reprinted several times: *Henryk Baginski*: Zaganienie dostepu Polski do morza, Warsaw 1927.

51 For example, in the speech by *Kazimierz Kowalski*, chairman of the main board of the National Party, given during the meeting of political party officials of the National Party in Warsaw on April 30, 1939. Cf. *Kowalski*, Polska, Warsaw 1939.

52 The countless contrary assertions cannot and need not be listed here. One notable example, however, is *Richard Blanke,* who, in his detailed and unusually objective treatise on the fate of Germans in the Republic of Poland between 1918 and 1939, also cannot avoid saying that *Hitler* revealed his plans at the Hoßbach meeting to "solve the problem of German living space by destroying Poland." See *Blanke,* Orphans, p. 215.

had already quietly written off."[53]Towards the end of his speech he therefore emphasized once again "that he was convinced of England's non-participation and therefore did not believe in military action by France against Germany."[54]Overall, the Hoßbach transcript paints a picture of a dictator waiting for an opportunity to improve Germany's position in Central Europe to such an extent that military threats and actual attacks by its neighbors in the East and West would be ruled out in the future.

Hitler wanted to achieve these goals militarily by 1943–45 at the latest. If necessary, war was to be waged against Austria and Czechoslovakia, not against the Western powers. This would fulfill his legacy, establish "Greater Germany," and pave the way for supremacy in Europe. This document does not mention an attack on Russia, and conflict with France is also to be avoided if possible. In fact, the scenario even presupposes a conflict between France and Great Britain on the one hand and Italy on the other, in the wake of which Germany can pursue its goals *without* intervening. However, the opportunity should be used to create facts elsewhere. If Hitler's statements at this point are taken seriously, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that in 1937 he saw himself in a position to avoid a major European war during his lifetime. One month later, on December 13, 1937, Hitler approved the military proposal formulated on this basis.
"Case Green," which, however, in the event of these plans failing, aimed to "wage a war of aggression against Czechoslovakia and *thus* bring *the solution to the German space problem* to a victorious conclusion, even if one or more of the great powers intervened against us."[55]Hitler's statements on that day not only do not support the theory of his intentions to conquer living space in the East, but even refute it.

Against this background, even, and perhaps especially, the standard works of West German historiography repeatedly produced direct untruths. Hans Adolf Jacobsen claimed in his standard work on the
"National Socialist foreign policy": Hitler is said to have "first confided his aggressive plans for conquering living space in the East" to individuals such as Foreign Minister Neurath on November 5, 1937. [56]Based on this inaccurate assertion he then attests that Neurath was "unaware of the nature of National Socialism."[57] Now, essence is always a fleeting concept, especially when its definition is attempted on the basis of inaccurate observations

---

[53] Ibid., p. 30.
[54] Ibid., p. 32.
[55] Quoted from *Messerschmidt*, Lagebild, p. 146. Emphasis added by me.
[56] Cf. *Jacobsen*, Außenpolitik, p. 33.
[57] *Neurath* himself testified before the Nuremberg Tribunal that *Hitler's* three-hour speech at the time revealed aggressive tendencies but no concrete content. Cf. IMT, XVI, p. 700.

will be. [58]Since this false claim that Hitler spoke of conquering "living space in the East" on November 5, 1937, is central to Jacobsen's line of thought, he repeats it several times in his nearly thousand-page volume.[59] At one point, he also brings into play the "Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan," which Hitler had written in the summer of 1936. The ideas expounded there were "tailored to a future program of expansion in the East":[60]

> "The 'Führer' saw the final solution to the German problem in the expansion of living space and the raw materials and food supply base. To this end, the political leadership had to make the German Wehrmacht operational within four years and the economy capable of war within the same period."(61)

It would take volumes to document the extent to which these imaginatively constructed connections are adopted in research and education, even though there is actually no mention of them in the memorandum on the Four-Year Plan. According to Hitler, the German armed forces were indeed to be ready for war in four years, but not to conquer living space, but to defend against a possible Soviet attack. This attack would come from the Soviet Union and could not be avoided. Hermann Göring explained the memorandum, which he is said to have read out in full at the meeting of the Council of Ministers on September 4, as follows:

> "It is based on the fundamental idea that conflict with Russia is inevitable. What the Russians have achieved in terms of reconstruction, we can also achieve."(62)

---

[58]*Walther Hofer* also uses this term and asserts that "historians would only contribute to the distortion of historical truth if they believed that they could truly grasp the essence or mischief of the National Socialist system, both in terms of foreign and domestic policy, using traditional categories and concepts from European history." See *Hofer,* Entfesselung, p. 13. It is true that new historical phenomena also require new concepts to describe them. However, the "essence" is an ancient and vague concept, and attempts to describe the essence of National Socialism without truthfully reproducing the content of central sources have in many cases contributed nothing to the search for truth.

[59]On page 431, he adds the phrase "Lebensraum im Osten" (living space in the East), which does not appear in the original, in brackets to an almost verbatim reproduction of Hoßbach's text. On page 435, he again claims that *Hitler* "revealed the violent conquest of Lebensraum im Osten" on November 5, 1937, as his "far-reaching power-political goal." Finally, his nearly eighty-page chronicle of Nazi foreign policy does not do without this false claim, recording for that day: *"Hitler's secret speech* to the Reich Foreign Minister and the commanders-in-chief of the Wehrmacht units *about his planned expansion policy in the East*." Cf. *Jacobsen,* Außenpolitik, p. 837, emphasis in the original (sic!).

[60] Cf. *Jacobsen*, Außenpolitik, p. 433.

[61] Quoted from *Jacobsen*, Außenpolitik, p. 433.

[62] Quoted from IMT, XXXVI, Doc. 416-EC, p. 490. Present at the meeting: Prime Minister *Göring,* Reich Minister of War *Blomberg,* Reichsbank President *Schacht,* Finance Minister *Krosigk,* Finance Minister *Popitz,* State Secretary *Körner,* 'Economic Representative of the Führer' *Keppler,* Ministerial Director *Neumann,* 'Chief of Staff of the Reich Farmers' Leader' Dr. *Reischle,* Recording Secretary Lieutenant Colonel *Löb.*

One could open a discussion on this point, for example on the question of how Germany's eastern and occupation policy of 1939–45 is compatible with the statements in the memorandum on the Four-Year Plan or the Hoßbach Memorandum, in particular with the contents of the 'General Plan East' commissioned by the SS. One could speculate that Hitler did not reveal his thoughts on both occasions in 1936 and 1937, but inwardly reserved the right to implement a policy of expansion, as once outlined in Mein Kampf. Jacobsen and countless other authors do not take this approach. They take the path of an inaccurate representation of the content of the available sources. This may be due to the fact that the declarations of intent from 1936/37 and German foreign policy from 1938/39 that are actually preserved in the sources paint a coherent picture. It is the picture of a policy aimed at Greater German unity under a National Socialist constitution, not the picture of a boundless policy of expansion towards the 'East'.[63]

Finally, Rolf-Dieter Müller attempted to solve the same problem some time ago through suggestion. This is also worth mentioning, as he, as an employee of the Military History Research Office and holder of a professorship, claimed to have written a standard work on "Germany's last war." In his sketch of Hitler's intentions, he also mentions the 1936 "Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan," in which Hitler stated his goal of "making the German economy ready for war within four years." Müller does not mention that, according to this very memorandum, this was to be done in order to repel a Soviet attack. Instead, he states that Hitler had "vaguely spoken internally of 'living space in the East'". In the next line, Müller then continues, with reference to the Hoßbach Protocol, that in this speech Hitler had "made it clear for the first time that he was determined to accelerate the course of foreign policy expansion". Even though the Hoßbach Protocol also makes no mention of 'Lebensraum in the East', the keyword is at least imaginatively incorporated. ([64])Müller also demonstrated his imagination in another paper on Hitler's alleged plans to invade the USSR in 1939. Since no such invasion plans can be found anywhere, Müller naturally faces a problem. He solves it as follows: in the title of a chapter, he refers to a "war of intervention against the Soviet Union?" and then in the text to Germany's "interest in the 'breadbasket' of Ukraine, the raw materials

---

[63] *Klaus Hildebrand*, who renders the text fairly accurately in terms of content, nevertheless rejects this conclusion on the grounds that *Hitler's* demand for the "destruction" of "the whole of Czechoslovakia" goes beyond the "Greater German national idea" of the 19th century. This is completely inaccurate. There was consensus in the Paulskirche that at least the entire territory of the then German Confederation should be designated as Germany and integrated into a newly constituted German state, and this included the whole of "Czechoslovakia" as it existed in 1937. See *Hildebrand*, Reich, p. 740.

[64] Cf. *Müller*, Krieg, p. 24.

of the Donets Basin and the oil of the Caucasus" for the solution of economic problems. He then continues:

> "Reich Foreign Minister Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath assured American Ambassador William C. Bullitt on May 18, 1936, that from Hitler's point of view, hostility toward the USSR was insurmountable and that he only wanted to remain calm until the western fortifications were completed."[65]

As the source for this claim that Hitler wanted to take action against the USSR after the construction of the Siegfried Line, author Müller cites the transcripts of the Nuremberg Tribunal, specifically an English-language record of Bullitt's conversation with von Neurath. However, the transcript states the following:

> "We discussed relations between Germany and the Soviet Government. Von Neurath said that he (not Hitler, but Neurath; S.Sch.) considered the hostility between Germany and the Soviet Union absolutely irremovable. He asserted that the Soviet Union believed that Nazi Germany was the one obstacle to the conquest of Europe by Communism. There could be no end, therefore (sic), to the hostility between the two states."[66]

The transcript of Bullitt's conversation therefore states the exact opposite of what author Müller claims. The USSR is named as the aggressor and source of hostility, as it is in Hitler's statements and memos from this period, which Müller also misrepresents. The passage mentioned by Müller about the completion of the German western fortifications also has no connection whatsoever with the USSR, but refers to a political strengthening against *Italian* interventionist intentions in Austria, which *Neurath (*again, not Hitler) hopes these fortifications will achieve.

To conclude this passage on the directly untruthful content of influential writings on contemporary history: The subject of this study is finally touched upon by Ribbentrop biographer Stephan Kley, who, like Churchill, directly links the Hoßbach Protocol to plans for extermination in connection with an essay on the prehistory of the Holocaust and Hitler's "prophecy" of January 1939. Kley writes that on November 5, 1937, Hitler

> "to his plans, which had already been fixed in the 1920s. He wanted to conquer living space at the expense of the Soviet Union, and since this war was to take place in 1943 at the latest, there was not much time to lose in carrying out the preparatory wars in Central and Western Europe."[68]

Let us content ourselves with the observation that here too, in the context of a description of the foreign policy formulated by Hitler and Ribbentrop, only a long-standing and unfounded rumor about the content of the Hoßbach memo is being spread.

---

65 Quoted from *Müller*, Überfallpläne, p. 79.
66 Quoted from IMT Vol. 37, Doc. 150-L, pp. 588–592, p. 590.
67 Cf. ibid. p. 589.
68 Quoted from *Kley*, Intention, p. 203.

We conclude this digression with a look at another Ribbentrop biographer, Michael Bloch, who speculates whether Ribbentrop knew about the meeting on November 5, 1937,(69) at which, according to Bloch, Hitler informed his inner circle that

"annex Czechoslovakia, Austria, and 'living space in the East' for economic and racial reasons."[70]

It is difficult to determine whether this is a case of deliberate misinformation or whether the connection between the "Hossbach Protocol" and "Lebensraum im Osten" is one of those misguided ideas from which the self-reflective world of academic pseudo-debates is not immune, if only for reasons of milieu formation. In any case, the former cannot be ruled out, and this alone is scandalous in view of the claim to supposedly scientifically based interpretive authority.

Hitler's remarks on that day provided a complete picture of his current political goals at the time. In fact, they contain all the essential motives that had accompanied his grand political theories up to that point. The keyword
"Living space" appears, as do soil depletion, pressure from population growth, and the need for self-sufficient economies. All of this is embedded in strategic considerations regarding Italy's distracting effect on France, which were already present in Mein Kampf. Fears of a possible Soviet attack are also alluded to. In addition to these considerations, there remains the curious question of why a man who had extensive expansion plans distributed in millions of copies should have concealed the details from even the innermost military leadership. There is therefore little reason not to take Hitler at his word and see this speech as an updated version of his expansion plans. And these plans were indeed extensive enough in the new version to mark the completion of a life's work that the head of state and party leader of a European nation state could only contemplate with a great willingness to take risks. It has been argued, however, that expansion on this scale could "hardly be seen as a real extension of the 'living space of the German people'".[71] Apart from the fact that it too replaces the source material with speculation about alleged concealment, this interpretation is based on an ahistorical conception of the circumstances, which then immediately leads to a contradiction. Hitler was not concerned with "revision," Walther Hofer argues as a further argument against limiting Hitler's goals in the sense of the Hoßbach text. (72) In fact, according to this document, it was also a matter of

---

[69] *Ribbentrop* himself was in Rome on November 5–6, 1937, for the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact.

[70] Quoted from *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 154.

[71] Cf. *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 14.

[72] Cf. *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 15.

not merely a revision of the decisions of the Treaty of Versailles, but the creation of something unprecedented. A German state within the ethnically and historically justified borders between the Meuse and Memel, Adige and Belt rivers had never existed before in the industrial age. The desire to establish such a state under the auspices of National Socialist ideology, with the necessary consequences for the political and economic balance of power in Central Europe, posed a challenge to the European community of states. Nevertheless, Hitler clearly intended to establish this state, if possible with the approval of countries such as France, Italy, and England, but if necessary without this approval, by creating a fait accompli. This was a clear concept, the implementation of which he ultimately entrusted to Joachim von Ribbentrop in 1938/39. It was a concept that was to set the framework for "generations," not forever.

The settlement and restructuring plans for Eastern Europe developed by the SS after the outbreak of war in 1939 do not contradict this interpretation. They were not the expression of a pre-determined program, but rather an attempt to exploit the opportunities presented by an unexpected new situation. Economically, militarily, and ideologically, the Nazi regime went into the war with insufficient preparation. The propaganda slogan of the "Greater German struggle for freedom," which was soon developed, unwittingly expressed this. The regime's primary war aim was to assert itself within the borders that had been reached in 1939. Attempts to portray the war beyond that as a
The idea of portraying a "European struggle for freedom" or constructing a "Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation" was added later and contrived. Above all, however, they did not correspond to the ideas and plans that had existed in 1939. Historians were also aware of this to some extent when the search for the great conquest plans of the Nazi era remained stubbornly unsuccessful:

> "Of course, I cannot send you any spectacular directives or very detailed plans, for example – the entire projects and intentions regarding the 'spatial-political reorganization' in the southeast often range from rather vague, historicizing, or grandiose projections into the future, to wishful thinking and memoranda"[73]

The regime did not start the war as a war of expansion. It felt forced into war by the policies of its opponents in an Anglo-Polish-French coalition. The military successes achieved then created a new situation, also for the SS, as Peter Longerich points out in his biography of Himmler, which indirectly concedes in this passage that the

---

[73] Quoted from BA-KO N 1213/3, letter from *Hans-Ulrich Wehler* to *Hans Rothfels* dated December 14, 1960. But even *Wehler* believed that these fantasies pointed to "the fundamental excessiveness of National Socialist expansionist policy."

The time horizon of Nazi policy did not include any major plans for conquest during the lifetime of the current leadership group:

> "The course set between the spring and fall of 1942 also makes it clear that Himmler's perspective on the establishment of this new order of rule had shifted dramatically: Whereas at the end of the 1930s he had still assumed that the Reich would only be in a position to achieve world power status in a few generations (sic), this period now shrank in his perception as if in fast motion. The mighty Reich was *now* being established and had to act *now* to secure a decisive role for itself and its Schutzstaffel. The motive of accelerating developments that were already underway was decisive in this regard, because in view of the imminent victory of the Wehrmacht, a window of opportunity seemed to be opening that would allow the realization of ideas that had previously seemed utopian."([74])

Before 1939, especially in 1937, when Hitler formulated his expansionist goals, which Ribbentrop was then to implement as minister, the aspirations were still focused on completely different things. Germany was to become a state governed according to National Socialist racial theories, with a state-socialist economy and only minimal federal elements. The Germany envisaged by Hitler was to be established within the borders that had comprised the Old Empire and the German Confederation until 1866.

---

[74] Quoted from *Longerich*, Himmler, p. 662, emphasis in the original.

VII. Foreign Minister for Deterrence

1. Risk considerations

> "The most important task of our policy, and thus also of the foreign missions involved in this, (remains) to reinforce the existing general aversion to an attack on Germany with suitable arguments and to have a cooling or deterrent effect on any hotheads in the democratic camp. The clear indication of the *enormous risk* that such powers would expose themselves to without any threat to their own vital interests by intervening in a conflict in this way, i.e., by unleashing a world war, is the best diplomacy here."
>
> Circular letter from Foreign Minister Ribbentrop dated August 3, 1938[1]

In his final report as ambassador, Ribbentrop had outlined the possibility that Great Britain could adopt a policy directed against Germany and possibly launch an attack. From this, he derived various political considerations in this document and in conversations on other occasions, which historians and diplomats have often described as "anti-British," but which are a logical conclusion of his thoroughly reasoned opinion. If, despite all efforts, Great Britain had become a potential threat instead of a potential ally, German foreign policy had to respond. In theory, this could mean bowing to the probable British wishes and orienting oneself in future to the territorial status of 1937. This possibility existed, but it would have meant renouncing claims on which there had already been consensus in the German diplomatic service during the Weimar period, and thus a renewed recognition of the fact that the victorious powers had arbitrarily drawn borders through the middle of Germany in 1919. This did not correspond to the thinking of the German leadership, even outside the National Socialists, and did not seem to be absolutely necessary after the events of 1933 to 1937. Germany's rearmament and unilateral actions had changed the political situation in Europe, but they had ultimately been tolerated. War always threatened a German state if it did not align itself with the wishes and fears of European capitals. If the demographic and economic development of this German state were to regain the momentum it had before 1914, it would pose a potential threat to international

---

[1] Quoted from ADAP, D, II, Doc. 332, p. 422, emphasis in the original. Quote also found in *Stefan Kley*, where the passage "unleashing a world war" has been deleted. See *Kley*, Entfesselung, p. 85.

international order that might be opposed, even if, like the former German Empire, it expressly renounced territorial expansion in Europe.

For himself personally, Ribbentrop drew the conclusion from this situation that Germany's strength and readiness for war, as well as the catastrophic consequences of a general war, should be emphasized more strongly in future. This was a valid but ambivalent argument. On the one hand, Germany's defensive capabilities were a fact that no conceivable developments in international relations could change. Even a successful policy of encirclement by Germany's enemies before and during the First World War had not enabled an intra-European victory over Germany. Only the intervention of the USA secured this victory – at a high price for Great Britain. If London were to repeat this policy, it would have to take great risks again and could end up with a political loss even in the event of military success. On the other hand, however, too frequent references to Germany's own military strength could also be interpreted as an attempt at blackmail and poison the situation. Ribbentrop therefore decided to emphasize both Germany's strength and the modesty of its goals. This verbal double strategy was intended to "deter" Great Britain from a war of aggression. The circular letter to all missions quoted above emphasized this concept several times in the summer of 1938. It emphasized German military strength, but at the same time emphasized the desire for a peaceful solution to the current Czechoslovak crisis. It stated once again – correctly – that there had been no German intention to attack Czechoslovakia in May of that year, as the Prague government had claimed. Gloomily – but also correctly – it predicted that Germany would, "*if attacked* ... "not shy away from anything" and optimistically—but inaccurately—appealed to"the political triangle of Berlin-Rome-Tokyo."[2]

One of the most important instruments in connection with the intended deterrence, apart from rhetoric and armament, had to be the winning of allies who would act as an active counterweight to hostile British policy, or who, as German "allies," should at least be prevented from joining an anti-German policy led from London. From this perspective, the international environment in the spring of 1938, when Ribbentrop took over the Foreign Office, continued to look unpromising. Germany had no allies who had committed themselves to anything that London might find objectionable. Ribbentrop, in his dual role as ambassador and advisor to the head of state on foreign policy issues, had made initial attempts to change this, but no binding results had been achieved. The later members of the Tripartite Pact, for example, had so far only been considered allies in the eyes of the American president.

---

[2] See ADAP, D, II, Doc. 332, p. 421, emphasis in the original.

joint group of states, which, according to the wording of one of his public speeches in late 1937, he wanted to place under "quarantine," without, however, explicitly naming them. This partial discretion on the part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was much more in line with the relations between Germany, Italy, and Japan than his parallel conspiracy theories or Ribbentrop's "triangle" metaphor. Japan, in particular, kept all its options open.

As in the case of Great Britain, Ribbentrop had personally negotiated an agreement with Japan that initially raised expectations of closer cooperation. While the 1935 naval agreement with Great Britain had fueled such hopes, in the case of Japan, hopes were pinned on the 1936 Anti-Comintern Pact, which Ribbentrop had signed in his dual capacity as ambassador to London and chief foreign policy advisor. The history of this treaty also dated back to 1935, when the Soviet Union's impending involvement in European politics through its pact with France and Czechoslovakia, signed in May of that year, threatened to completely shift the balance of power. Hitler then publicly announced that he would no longer respect the Locarno Treaty if this pact were ratified,[3] so that the post-war order developed for Europe in the mid-1920s, for which Briand and Stresemann had received the Nobel Peace Prize at the time, lost its significance as a result of the new intra-European interactions. At around the same time as these developments, Ribbentrop asked the then Japanese military attaché and later ambassador Oshima, through an intermediary, whether there was any possibility of concluding a defense pact between Germany and Japan against the Soviet Union.[4] The pragmatic idea behind this was that if France wanted to position the USSR behind Germany, Japan should threaten the USSR's rear in return. Beyond this purely mechanical perspective, however, Ribbentrop saw Japan as a country in isolation, "for which, theoretically, only Germany could be considered a partner today."

---

[3] In his 1937 publication "Abrechnung" (Settling Accounts), former communist *Willi Schlamm* claimed that that *Hitler* had concluded a friendship treaty with the USSR "in May 1935" in which "steady and trusting cooperation between the German government and the government of the USSR," "friendly relations with each other," "political and economic understanding," "neutrality in the event of an attack by third powers," and "no participation in an economic or financial boycott of either party to the treaty by third parties" had been agreed upon. This happened at a time when Russian-English tensions prevailed over the Vickers conflict. See *Schlamm,* Abrechnung, p. 138. *Schlamm* went on to predict: "It won't be long before the gentlemen 'Führers' agree on a 'realistic' non-aggression pact (sic): one will guarantee *Stalin's* Russian nation state, the other will leave Europe to Hitler's fate and, incidentally, complete the already successful extermination of the old world revolutionary Bolshevik concept." See *Schlamm,* Abrechnung, p. 139. In fact, *Stalin* tried hard to play the national card at the time, and the Italian Communist Party even campaigned with "Fascists and non-fascists – for the common struggle against the real enemy of the nation: big capitalism." Cf. *Schlamm*, Abrechnung, p. 140.

[4] See *Oshima's* postwar statement in *Sommer*, Pakte, p. 25.

"is coming," as he later told a new employee of the Ribbentrop office, Hermann von Raumer. [5]

In fact, Japan, traditionally culturally isolated, had placed itself in open opposition to the two Western European powers and the US with its expansionist course on the Asian mainland, which had become militant in 1932, and its withdrawal from the League of Nations. With its anti-communist stance, it was also not a conceivable partner for the USSR. The list of potential Japanese allies of standing was therefore quite short in the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, the Japanese response to Ribbentrop's suggestion was hesitant and vague. On the one hand, this was due to the limited value that such a defense pact could have with a country like Germany, which, unlike Japan, did not share a border with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, this attitude was caused by the fundamentally indecisive and opaque decision-making of the Tokyo elite, which was to be a constant feature of their politics in the following decade and did not commit to any partner out of genuine conviction. At the end of November 1935, Raumer, who had finally been commissioned by Ribbentrop to draft a proposal on this matter, found the solution to this problem. A pact was to be concluded that remained as non-binding as possible and was not formally directed against the USSR at all, but against an organization with which the Soviet Union officially had nothing to do: the Comintern. On November 25, Ribbentrop received the corresponding draft from Raumer. He had Hitler approve it within an hour and started negotiations on this basis, which were still protracted but ended after a year in November 1936 with the signing of this virtually unchanged draft.

---

[5] *Raumer* summarized this and other quotations in a 106-page typewritten manuscript, which was cited in older literature such as *Theo Sommer's* study on "Germany and Japan between the Powers," but which has apparently not been preserved. See *Sommer*, Pakte, p. 27, and information provided by *Theo Sommer* to the author.

[6] The fact that *Ribbentrop* signed this pact in Rome certainly contributed to rumors about his transfer from London to Rome, which culminated in a formal farewell article that appeared in the News Chronicle on November 6, 1937. Allegedly by
Informed by "highly reliable" German sources about the appointment, which had already been made, journalist *Vernon Bartlett* presented the "Anti-Comintern Pact" as actually being an anti-English pact, as a result of which *Ribbentrop* could hardly return to St. James's Court as ambassador. Despite his many friendships with aristocratic Englishmen "with very reactionary views," *Ribbentrop* ultimately achieved nothing as ambassador. Finally, the article called for *Ulrich von Hassell* to be appointed as his successor in London:
"No other appointment could be more suitable for improving relations between Great Britain and Germany." Despite various investigations, the exact origin of the rumor in the Foreign Office could not be determined, but the nature of the presentation and the final demand suggest that the Kordt-Weizsäcker Circle was the source. See PA-AA R 27157, Ribbentrop personal files, article from the News Chronicle of November 6, 1937, and several notes for the ambassador. A year later, the London Star published a similar report and wanted to see *Ribbentrop* demoted from foreign minister to ambassador in Rome, with *Neurath* as his successor, because he had advocated "moderation" in Munich. See PA AA, R 27157, unsigned report of October 5, 1938.

The Anti-Comintern Pact of this nature became such a symbolic undertaking that Ribbentrop, during later negotiations in Moscow, jokingly remarked to Stalin that the Soviet Union could actually join the Anti-Comintern Pact itself one day. This remark was not made entirely in jest. Ribbentrop considered the Anti-Comintern structure, which had already been supplemented by Italy's accession at that point and which only vaguely hinted at an alliance constellation, to be flexible enough in principle to be supplemented under the changed circumstances – and under a different name – to form a genuine continental bloc. If the Soviets, who would play the central role as the "heartland" of such a bloc, wanted this, then, in his view, a long-term policy could be organized in this way. As far as can be seen, Ribbentrop never really gave up hope of a genuine balance of interests with the USSR, even though the non-aggression pact of 1939 was concluded primarily as a result of the deterrence strategy towards Great Britain that was current at the time. At that time, Ribbentrop tried at all costs to prevent the formation of an alliance between the Western powers and the USSR directed against Germany, which, together with the tripartite pact between France, England, and Poland already concluded in the spring of 1939, would have completed the encirclement he feared.

Things were far from that stage in 1936, when Ribbentrop signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan in Berlin in November 1936. Just a few months earlier, he had taken up his post as ambassador in London, immediately warning of the communist threat upon his arrival and initially working with optimism—at times not without justification—toward an Anglo-German alliance, which, according to his intentions, should also include an anti-Comintern component. Under Ribbentrop's general assumption that Germany would ultimately have to "opt" between West and East, the Western option appeared at that time to be the one with the greatest substance and the best prospects of success. All negotiations with Japan should not "disrupt this English line of German policy," as Ribbentrop stated to Raumer when some proposals from Tokyo seemed questionable to him in this regard. The desired German-English alliance took precedence; even in the form of a consultation pact, it would have had the effect of making possible aggression against Germany much less likely.

The London press reacted negatively to the Anti-Comintern Pact. The pro-government Times rubbed salt in the wound with an article entitled "Three make a community?" which addressed the major differences between countries such as Italy and Germany on the one hand and Japan on the other. It ironically asked what the exact content of the pact was supposed to be and whether gentlemen's shops in Tokyo would soon also be selling plain-colored shirts "with political significance."

---

[7] *Raumer*, MS, p. 17, quoted here from *Sommer*, Pakte, p. 44.

would buy: "Isolation may be cold and uncomfortable, but it is better to stew in your own juice than to end up in other people's boiling water."[8] The latter was, of course, an indirect admission that Japan had been isolated not only by its own behavior, but also by British policy. But the conclusion of the article, according to which "it is not the nature of British policy to enter into international political commitments that involve allegiance to any doctrinaire group," was clearly directed against Ribbentrop's efforts in this pro-government newspaper.

As foreign minister, Ribbentrop believed, based on his observations in London, that there was an imminent danger of England launching a war of aggression against Germany. Since the spring of 1938, symbolic treaties were no longer sufficient for him. After futile efforts to conclude treaties with England or France, his task now was to find binding partners. Despite the preparations for the Anti-Comintern Pact, both Italy and Japan proved to be reluctant partners. Ultimately, the three states had little in common, even if they might superficially appear to be "three fascist powers" (Karl Haushofer). Their goals, political traditions, current ideologies, power-political capabilities, and strategic situations were in fact very different. This became abundantly clear during the negotiations on a joint defense pact, which revealed the differences between Japan and Italy on the one hand and Germany on the other. The initiative for the negotiations came consistently from Berlin. Ribbentrop wanted to reach an agreement with Italy and Japan that would take effect in the event of defense or deter England altogether from the aggressive policy he attributed to the London government. The three states would then defend themselves militarily in the event of an alliance; despite all setbacks, the German negotiating strategy presented this goal undeterred over the years.

However, the two partners mentioned, Italy and Japan, firstly did not feel threatened by England in the existential way that Berlin saw it, and secondly, they did not seek border revisions within a historical-ethnic framework, as was Ribbentrop's further task. Italy and Japan had long been successfully conquering empires that they had never possessed in their history. Since 1932, Japan had pursued a policy of constant conquest against China, had already split off the "Manchukuo Empire" from China in Manchuria, and had been aiming to gain further territory since 1937. Tokyo assumed that Britain was in a phase of weakness that would make such conquests possible and ultimately lead to their legal consolidation. Although the Tokyo elite wanted to avoid war with Britain and the United States, they did not fear it so much that they were willing to abandon their ongoing policy of conquest. This awareness

---

[8] Times, November 18, 1936, article by *Peter Fleming*, quoted here from PA AA London, vol. 1594.

Despite its relative strength, it represented the unifying element of an "elite" whose political decision-making otherwise remained inscrutable.

In the years leading up to 1938, Italy had also just completed the conquest of an "empire," the East African empire of Ethiopia. Originally punished with sanctions by the Western powers and the League of Nations, which they dominated, Mussolini succeeded in obtaining recognition of this conquest under international law from the British government even during Ribbentrop's first treaty offers. This step could be interpreted in Berlin as part of British efforts to undermine the exclusivity of the nascent German-Italian relations. Ribbentrop personally could see it as part of the general strategy announced to him by Churchill to "turn around" German allies, especially since this was one of his first experiences as foreign minister. On April 16, 1938, an Italian-British treaty was signed in Rome, which essentially contained the British government's assurance that it would secure international recognition for Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, including within the framework of the League of Nations, in return for the withdrawal of Italian troops from Spain, where they had taken sides during the civil war. This represented a significant and fundamental change in the British position on the recognition of facts brought about by force in international politics, a change that could also have an impact on the situation in East Asia and the Japanese conquests, according to an assessment by the Foreign Office.[9] Great Britain could "buy out" potential German allies[10] before Ribbentrop could win them over.

Even before and during the Munich Conference, Ribbentrop attempted to turn the existing Anti-Comintern Pact into a genuine defense pact that would include Japan. On September 29, 1938, on the sidelines of the Munich Conference, he had Ciano present a draft treaty, of which apparently only the Italian version has survived. Among other things, it called for "support and assistance" in the event of an attack on Italy. September 1938, on the sidelines of the Munich Conference, a draft treaty, of which apparently only the Italian version has survived, and which included, among other things, "assistance and aid" in "the event that one of the contracting states should become the object of an unprovoked attack by one or more third states."[11] His aim was to provide a defensive backdrop as quickly as possible, and one has to agree with Theo Sommer that the conclusion and publication of such an agreement would initially create "as impressive a facade as possible" for Ribbentrop.

---

[9] Cf. ADAP, D, I, Doc. 755, p. 890, unsigned memorandum dated April 27, 1938, with a summary of the content and political assessment from a file volume *by von Weizsäcker*. The exact text of the agreement can be found in "Documents on International Affairs" 1938, II, London 1943, p. 141 ff.

[10] This was *Ribbentrop's* wording in the conclusions to his main report as ambassador at the turn of 1937/38. See *Ribbentrop*, Kriegsschuld, p. 77.

[11] Cf. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 142.

[12] The details of "support and assistance" would in any case still have to be negotiated, and in fact negotiations between Italy, Japan, and Germany continued for years without a military assistance pact ever being concluded.

Mussolini also had plans for further expansion, had "Corsica, Nice, Tunis" chanted in the streets, and did not demand "revision" but sought to acquire new land and rights elsewhere, for example in Albania. In contrast, Ribbentrop's suggestions for a defense pact against the Western powers lacked the imperialist characteristics that Mussolini would have liked to see. In October 1938, this led to a veritable clash when Ribbentrop, shortly after the Czechoslovakia crisis and the Munich Agreement, once again brought up the idea of a defensive alliance in Rome. He did so on the – accurate – grounds that Hitler, too, was concerned about the increasing military preparations of the Western powers. This coincided with his later statements that he had realized in Munich that the opponents in the West "wanted our heads at any price" and with the excitement over the rearmament unilaterally announced by Chamberlain after the agreement. Nevertheless, Ribbentrop was ultimately dismissed by Mussolini in a very undiplomatic manner:

> "We must not form a purely defensive alliance. We don't need to, because no one is thinking of attacking the totalitarian states. Instead, we want to form an alliance to change the world map. To do this, we need to set our goals and conquests: for our part, we know where we need to go."[13]

Ribbentrop was "stunned," Ciano noted after this appearance. He was forced to vaguely agree with Mussolini and named the Mediterranean as a legitimate Italian sphere of influence. He had previously assured that he wanted to continue the reconciliation with Poland on the basis of secure access to the sea for Poland, as already mentioned. Nevertheless, the differences were clearly articulated. In Berlin, they felt threatened and were not planning a conquest in Africa or elsewhere, but were seeking protection from a feared attack on their Greater German revisionist goals, an attack on the very existence of the state they had achieved in 1938. This had already led to a classic misunderstanding on the eve of this incident, as the Italian fascists apparently could not imagine this and thought exclusively in offensive terms. Combined with their Germanophobic mindset, this led to speculation about German intentions. Ciano had spoken to Ribbentrop at the hotel that evening, who apparently used the word "war." Italy's foreign minister noted with complete dissatisfaction:

---

[12] Cf. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 144.

[13] Quoted from *Ciano*, Papers, p. 245, record of the conversation between *Mussolini*, *Ciano* and *Ribbentrop* on October 28, 1938, in Rome.

"He repeats his speech from May; he has set his mind on war, he wants war, his war. He does not know and does not say what his exact course of action will be. He neither identifies the enemies nor specifies the objectives. But he wants war in the next three or four years."(14)

During this trip, Ribbentrop attempted to win Italy over to a defensive alliance in the war that he considered particularly possible or even probable, namely an Anglo-German war initiated by Great Britain. This war was to be avoided through the deterrent effect that such an alliance would have, which Ribbentrop repeatedly expressed rhetorically with allusions to Germany's readiness for war. Since there is no German recording of the conversation and no official Italian one either, this diary entry can hardly be interpreted in any other way than that Ciano initially wanted to accustom Italy to the possibility of having to defend itself militarily together with Germany, without already naming the possible aggressor and without formulating "goals" in the form of territorial gains.to the possibility of having to defend himself militarily together with Germany, without already naming the possible aggressor and without formulating "goals" in the form of territorial acquisitions, which did not exist in this scenario. Ciano did not understand this, even though Ribbentrop pointed out to him again explicitly in a conversation the next morning that he was concerned with "the conclusion of a purely defensive alliance between Italy, Germany, and Japan" that was to be directed "against unprovoked attacks."[15]Like his foreign minister, Mussolini also demonstratively refused to believe in a possible attack by the Western powers on the afternoon of the same day. This was to change only a few months later, under the impression of the deterioration of Franco-Italian relations at the end of 1938.[16] After his strong statements Mussolini nevertheless felt that a gesture of reconciliation was necessary and instructed Ciano to express further symbolic agreement with the proposed alliance to Ribbentrop.[17]At the beginning of 1939, Ribbentrop actually seemed to be moving closer to concluding an alliance with Italy, which had previously rejected his initiatives. Ambassador Attolico delivered a letter from Ciano to Ribbentrop announcing a change of heart on this issue and citing three reasons for it:

"1) The existence of a now proven military pact between France and England;

2) the prevalence of war theories in responsible French circles;

3) the military preparations in the United States, which are aimed at supplying the Western democracies with manpower and, above all, material in case of necessity."(18)

---

14 Quoted from *Ciano*, Diaries, October 28, 1938.

15 Cf. ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 400, *Schmidt's* notes of October 28, 1938.

16 On the causes of tension between the two states, cf. *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 73 f.

17 Cf. *Sommer*, Pakte, p. 149.

18 *Ciano* to *Ribbentrop*, cited in ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 421, p. 475, January 2, 1939.

The shift in Washington's policy at the end of 1938 towards a European policy that took into account the possibility of armed conflict between the Western powers and the Axis powers did not go unnoticed in Rome. Ciano's letter made no mention of ideological similarities between Germany and Italy. The Italian fascists now apparently saw themselves primarily as the target of a threat emanating mainly from France and supported by the two Anglo-Saxon powers,[19] so that this step now represented less an offer of assistance than a request for German assistance. Only under similar conditions would Japan also be prepared to conclude a joint defense pact with Germany and Italy in 1940, so that the quarantine policy against these three states, pushed by the American president, gave rise to this alliance full of contradictions.

In the spring of 1939, Japan, like Italy, refused to sign such a treaty. Ribbentrop wanted to achieve a full defense alliance between the three countries and opposed Japanese reservations. Tokyo only wanted to conclude a treaty in conjunction with an interpretative declaration to the Western powers. Paris, London, and Washington were to be expressly informed that the treaty would not affect them, either offensively or defensively. From Ribbentrop's point of view, this naturally rendered the entire project worthless. Any kind of statement to England, France, or the USA was out of the question:

> "The interpretation of the pact must be that it is purely defensive and therefore directed against no one, but that in the event of an attack by third powers, the treaty would apply to any aggressor, who would thus become the enemy of all three signatories to the pact."[20]

In order to bring about a change of heart in Tokyo, he even threatened Oshima for the first time with a possible German-Soviet agreement on the sidelines of the diplomatic receptions for Hitler's birthday on April 20, which was quite a significant announcement for Japan, which wanted to conclude a German-Japanese treaty primarily because of the Soviet threat. Regardless of this, and undoubtedly also under the influence of the new British policy, which culminated in July 1939 in the de facto recognition of Japanese conquests in China, the Japanese cabinet maintained its reservations. There was to be no defense pact between Japan, Italy, and Germany in 1939, which was undoubtedly a great success for the British.

---

[19] On January 14, *Ciano* noted, based on an agent report from Corsica, that there were undoubtedly genuine, "precise plans for an attack on France" in June of that year, which had been revealed in a speech by a regional Corsican political activist named *Campinelli*. See *Ciano*, Diaries, p. 25, January 14, 1939.

[20] *Ribbentrop's* statement was conveyed by Ambassador *Attolico* to Rome on April 4, 1939, and *by Oshima* to Tokyo on April 2. Quoted here from *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 198 f.

Politics. In this case, too, British promises to other countries proved to be an adequate diplomatic tool, while British diplomats in Tokyo did their utmost to fuel Japanese fears of becoming involved in European affairs through a pact with Germany and Italy without any real gain of their own.[21] "Gain" seemed much easier to acquire through British approval,[22] but since the turn of the year 1938/39,this had always been opposed by the clear stance of the American government, which did not recognize this means. Ultimately, however, Britain was able to declare war on Germany on September 3, 1939, without any other state feeling obliged to go to war on the German side.

The alliance, which Italy had repeatedly refused to enter into under many pretexts, suddenly seemed to have become urgent for the government in Rome under the above-mentioned signs of a French threat of attack. In a conversation with Ribbentrop in January 1939, Ambassador Attolico apparently added, on his own initiative, the desire for economic cooperation and emigration of the South Tyroleans as a kind of demand, which, in Ciano's opinion, was already "going too far."[23] Seemingly having achieved his goal, Ribbentrop nevertheless reacted largely positively at the time. He declared the South Tyrol question and the migration of the Germans living there to be merely a matter of free will and invited Ciano to Berlin on January 28, 1939, to sign the pact and military agreement.([24])However, this visit did not take place, as shortly afterwards the British made their next move and Neville Chamberlain and his delegation traveled to Italy in January to fulfill their promise to recognize the Italian Empire in Ethiopia. A German-Italian pact suddenly seemed inopportune, especially since Chamberlain appeared quite militant in Italy and emphasized the French and British willingness to wage war against further disrupters of the international order. ([25]) All of this was more or less talk, just like the numerous receptions and banquets held by the Italians to impress the Prime Minister.

---

[21] Foreign Minister *Halifax* to Ambassador *Shigemitsu* in London on April 27. See DBFP, IX, No. 25.

[22]Even after the above-mentioned agreement on the indirect recognition of Japanese rule in China, London politicians were keen to emphasize that it was possible to go even further, as *Halifax* did on August 23, 1939. See DBFP, IX, Doc. 574, *Halifax* to *Craigie*, here cited in *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 298.

[23] Cf. *Ciano*, Diaries, p. 20 f., January 7, 1939.

[24] Cf. ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 426, p. 480, *Ribbentrop* to *Ciano* on January 9, 1939. According to this, the draft of the pact and the secret additional protocol had already been handed over to *Attolico* and *Oshima*, but this is neither printed nor mentioned further in the ADAP.

[25] Cf. *Graml* vs. *Hoggan*, according to which *Hoggan* allegedly mistakenly wants to see a change of heart since Munich, while *Graml* emphasizes that *Chamberlain's* conversation transcript also asserted the readiness for war that already existed in Munich. Cf. Spiegel article about *Hoggan* with interview and *Graml's* criticism, in: Der Spiegel 20/1964.

were held, Oliver Harvey, private secretary to Foreign Minister Halifax, noted in advance: "The only justification for this visit is that it increases the likelihood that the Italians will betray the Germans if war actually breaks out."[26] England remained a tough opponent in the diplomatic game, as Ribbentrop had expected. However, Britain's room for maneuver vis-à-vis the Italian fascists was limited, because formally buying out a possible Italian-German alliance at the expense of the French possessions desired by Rome was out of the question under the circumstances, as Harvey immediately added. This would only briefly become an issue later, under the impression of the French defeat in May 1940.

The agreement between Italy and Germany, which was finally concluded months after Chamberlain's visit to Italy in May 1939 and became known as the "Pact of Steel," was ultimately brought about by another British move, the conclusion of a treaty between France, Poland, and England at the turn of March/April. The Steel Pact took up the wording of this treaty in detail·Mussolini and Ciano formally pressed Ribbentrop to conclude such a bilateral treaty during his stay in Milan on May 6/7, 1939. Hitler and Ribbentrop worked out the details in Berchtesgaden, where Ribbentrop had traveled directly from Milan. In the process, the previous draft of the Tripartite Pact was completely changed. The result was a pact without any restrictions, which, like the Anglo-Polish agreement, was to be used for both offensive and defensive purposes. Even now, despite all the pro-German rhetoric presented and declared in writing, Mussolini had no firm intention of waging war alongside Germany. At the same time, however, he refused to pay the British the price they had been promised, at least indirectly, for recognizing the Ethiopian-Italian Empire and to distance himself from Germany.

The Italian regime's unrestrained Machiavellianism led it to change sides at every opportunity, in 1940 with its sudden entry into the war on the German side and its unprovoked attack on the Western powers, as well as with its change of sides in 1943. Despite still having alliance obligations to Germany, the Italian government negotiated a quick change of sides with the Allies and wanted to force its soldiers to literally shoot their German allies in the back from the positions conquered by German troops and handed over to Italy. This last shift led to the almost universal refusal of the Italian

---

[26] Quoted from *Harvey*, Diary I, p. 229.

[27] This connection, which is regularly overlooked, is described in detail in: *Scheil*, Ver-einte Entfesselung, p. 94 ff.

lien military to allow themselves to be abused in this way, leading to the final downfall of the monarchist-fascist government.

In view of the disaster that ultimately befell German politics, the question arises once again as to the causes that led to it, including the relationship between necessity and arbitrariness. The attempt to avert England's allegedly imminent war of aggression with a combination of fait accompli in border revision matters, as well as threats and strength, was ultimately countered by other possibilities in principle. Even if England did indeed have the will to attack, its motives could have been thwarted by demonstrative passivity, acceptance of the status quo in Central Europe, and acceptance of England's colonial plans with regard to the Congo. Fleet agreements, rearmament of the army, and occupation of the Rhineland had improved the military situation compared to 1933 and made such a strategy possible. However, even this approach was not without risk for the German state. Even if the Soviet Union was left out of the equation, a conflict over Austria and, above all, Czechoslovakia could easily break out. As forced re-establishments of the post-war Paris treaties, neither state had its own stable internal raison d'être. A conflict, such as was always possible over economic policy issues or those of equal rights for Germans in Czechoslovakia, would have put Germany in a clearly inferior position in the event of Anglo-French intervention. If this scenario had been assumed, and Ribbentrop had outlined this in his report, then a German policy of passivity and acceptance of colonial gifts would at best have cast the question of responsibility for a "hot" conflict that had ultimately broken out in a different light, but would have significantly reduced Germany's chances of surviving this conflict. If, like Winston Churchill and many others in Western countries, one assumed a permanent war being waged for the right to exist as a unified German state, i.e., a conflict that had never really ended after 1918, for which Churchill himself later coined the phrase "the second Thirty Years' War," then a new escalation into hot war was always possible. Ribbentrop decided—partly under the influence of such statements by Churchill—to pursue a policy of deterrence. In order to overcome the English will to attack, the costs of an English war against Germany were to be steadily increased through Germany's own armament, the realization of its revisionist goals, but also through an alliance constellation that was unpleasant for Great Britain, namely German alliances with Italy and Japan, to such an extent that it would become unattractive. This was a comprehensible idea, but it meant playing a high-stakes game. In the event of a war with Germany, England could perhaps lose its existence as an empire, while Germany would possibly lose its state existence altogether.

If we remove Hitler and/or the Nazi regime from history and speculate about what might have happened without him, it is easy to imagine that a government composed of Schleicher, Neurath, and Weizsäcker would have pursued Greater German revisionist goals in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland (the legitimacy of which was fully agreed upon by these circles and large sections of the German public) would have led to a major European war with a similar course and outcome. Conversely, it should not be forgotten that it would not have been impossible for the Polish government to accept the final settlement offered after Munich in 1938 on the basis of the existing borders. It was by no means the case that the German head of state was necessarily heading for a German-Polish war in 1938/39 and that his intentions were a necessary condition for the outbreak of a "Second World War." Events could have taken a very different course with him as dictator, or in a very similar way without him as dictator. The war for peace, with which Hitler/Ribbentrop sought to achieve their goals in 1938/39, while at the same time trying to dissuade British policy from attacking Germany, which would claim more and more victims with every German gain, shook the international community. The self-image of the time, with its claim to the leadership of "sovereign" power politics of states based on mutual threat or coalition, stood in the way of European peace. Anyone who outlines Nazi Germany's responsibility for the second major European war that finally broke out within twenty-five years must outline it in this context.

As Ribbentrop had announced in his final report from London, a kind of colonial offer was indeed made in the spring of 1938, which Neville Chamberlain had passed on to Hitler via his ambassador in Berlin, Henderson. It concerned similar issues to those that Halifax, who had been promoted to British Foreign Secretary in November 1937, almost parallel to Ribbentrop, had already suggested. The British proposal did not rule out a change in the status quo in Central Europe in principle, but wanted to see "peaceful means" preserved and otherwise remained vague. In return, Germany was offered the prospect of cooperation in the administration of the Central African Congo,([28]) an issue to which the Chamberlain government would return once again in the summer of 1939.([29])

This was a typically English proposal in that it was entirely at the expense of third parties. There was no mention of the return of former German colonies that were under the administration of Great Britain or one of its dominions, such as East or South West Africa, which Ribbentrop pointed out in his

---

[28] Cf. ADAP, D, I, No. 138, March 3, 1938, *Hitler's* conversation with *Henderson* in the presence of *Ribbentrop*.

[29] Quoted from ADAP, D, VI, Doc. 716, p. 826, *Wohlthat's* report on his London talks of July 24, 1939.

Halifax also recalled his visit to London shortly thereafter. [30] "The Reich Foreign Minister pointed out once again that Germany had not made any demands on powers that had not taken colonies away from Germany. As is well known, Germany only demanded the return of its former colonies." According to British ideas, Belgian-controlled territory should primarily be the subject of trade, and London also intended to make a profit on this occasion. British imperialism wanted to be at the height of its power once again using its usual methods. This proposal was also linked to the renewed claim that the borders in Central Europe should be drawn according to British wishes. For Hitler, who, like Ribbentrop, regarded these borders with regard to Austria, Bohemia, and Moravia as arbitrary lines drawn by Germany, this posed a problem that touched on the core of his political ambitions. In his view, England could "keep the world" but not a right of veto in Central Europe. The state he wanted to create according to the program outlined on November 5, 1937, had its unrestricted interests there.

This British offer therefore did not provide a basis for overcoming Hitler's and Ribbentrop's mistrust. The colonial gift did not include the desired Anglo-German alliance, which could have countered Ribbentrop's warnings of a long-term threat of an English attack. Instead, it effectively demanded that Germany abandon the Nazi core project of a Greater German unity and left the German state without any allies in the face of a presumed impending conflict in which the Western powers and the Soviet Union could intervene as German opponents and in which colonial territories were completely worthless, as the previousThe mistrust of British policy could not be eliminated in this way. In a continuing era of imperialism, Hitler and Ribbentrop believed that they still had to fear a British attack in the long term, while at present, as Hitler had said on November 5 of the previous year, Austria and Czechoslovakia had perhaps already been "written off" in London. ([32]) If this was the case, then it was necessary to take advantage of it. Hitler responded to Henderson accordingly, pointing out that

> "Germany would not allow third powers to interfere in the regulation of its relations with tribal countries with large German populations."([33])

---

[30] Cf. ADAP, D, I, Doc. 145, p. 212, record of the *Ribbentrop-Halifax* conversation of March 10, 1938.

[31] Literally still in the fall of 1941. Cf. Hewel, Diary, September 8, 1941.

[32] See ADAP, D, vol. I, doc. 13, p. 30.

[33] Cf. ADAP, D, I, No. 138, March 3, 1938, conversation between *Hitler* and *Henderson* in the presence of *Ribbentrop*.

Opinions were divided on this claim. In the eyes of many British politicians, this was "Pan-Germanism" and thus exactly what the First World War had been fought against. Wickham Steed, the most agile player in Churchill's circle of supporters "Focus" in the mid-1930s and already active before 1914 as the British representative for the restructuring of relations in Central Europe, had specifically reminded Churchill of these old lines. One of the influential British journalists who considered Ribbentrop's approach to a German-British reconciliation to be realistic would fail to recognize precisely this danger:

> Mr. J. L. Garvin, who occasionally devotes himself to such German ideas, recommends that Britain accept a German "Central European" policy. He explains: "Mr. Hitler's real goal and dream is not the conquest of Russia, but the creation of a united Central Europe under German leadership.
>
> This is the old pan-German dream, against the fulfillment of which the Great War was in truth fought."[34]

From this perspective, the ideas that Hitler, Ribbentrop, and some opponents of the regime, including the assassins of July 20, 1944, had developed about the appropriate size of a German state[35] did indeed contain the seeds of conflict with Great Britain. Whether Steed's considerations were historically accurate played only a minor role in the course of British domestic politics. The wartime prime minister of the "Great War," David Lloyd George, no longer had such thoughts and in 1940 would speak of the "stupidest war" Britain had ever fought.[36] He was referring to the war that had been declared on the German Reich in 1939 in order to destroy its privileged position in Central Europe. But when Lloyd George made this statement, another line of thinking had already almost completely prevailed, one that wanted to pursue the war uncompromisingly to the end.

---

[34] Memorandum by *Wickham Steed* on general political issues. Sent to *Churchill* on March 17, 1937, by the secretary of the Focus, *A. H. Richards*. Quoted from CHAR 2/311 A, p. 41 f.

[35] The list of territorial demands drawn up by Colonel *Stauffenberg* in the event of a successful coup included "the Reich border of 1914 in the east, retention of Austria and the Sudetenland by the Reich, autonomy for Alsace-Lorraine, and the acquisition of Tyrol up to Bolzano and Merano." Quoted in *Jabobsen*, Opposition, p. 127.

[36] *Lloyd George* to US Under Secretary of State *Sumner Welles*. Cf. FRUS I, p. 86.

2. Prague and world politics

> "Not that I wasn't aware at all times that the complete subservience of the Czechs to Germany was inevitable. I was aware of that, and that's why all the talk about Holland, Switzerland, and Ukraine always irritated me. It distracted people's attention from the real goals and, I suspect, was spread by the extreme Nazis primarily for this purpose."
>
> Nevile Henderson[37]

After Austria's reunification with the German state, it did not take long before the issue of Czechoslovakia, which Hitler had raised with Henderson and which was the subject of international attention, was also on the agenda. In his reports to Hitler, Ribbentrop had warned that this issue could lead to the outbreak of a European war. Indeed, it initially looked that way, especially since, from the perspective of Ribbentrop's political opponents in England, Czechoslovakia was the perfect opportunity to draw England and Germany into a war. Once again, Winston Churchill was at the forefront. In the spring of 1938, he even directly called on the Czechoslovak government to provoke such a war itself. Sheila Grant Duff, the regular liaison between him and the Prague government, conveyed this to the Czechoslovak capital on April 21, 1938:
"He (i.e. Churchill, author's note) would bet 50:1 that Germany would not attack Czechoslovakia in the near future. He expressly said that he would prefer it if Czechoslovakia provoked a war."[38]The Prague leadership worked on this a few weeks later, in May 1938, when they alarmed the European public with fabricated reports of alleged German troop concentrations on the German-Czechoslovak border.

The encouraging signals from London and Paris played a key role in this. The Czech leadership believed that Czechoslovakia's military capabilities depended primarily on its position in European politics. Although it had ensured that Czechoslovakia was a defensible country with a comprehensive rearmament and fortification program, it did not intend to wage such a war independently of international support. According to the existing alliance treaties, such support had to be provided by France and, since 1935, also by the Soviet Union. This is precisely where the military risks lay for Germany, as both countries interpreted Czechoslovakia as a forward base for attacks on German population centers and industrial centers. Czechoslovakia as an "aircraft carrier" for other powers posed

---

[37] Cf. DBFP, III, vol. 4, Appendix I, p. 595, *Henderson* to *Halifax* on March 15, 1939.
[38] Quoted in *Kral*, Agreement, p. 117, April 21, 1938.

This represented not only a general political affront to the right of self-determination of parts of the German population living there, but also a real military threat. A European war could break out over the political conflicts with Prague and be waged offensively from Bohemia and Moravia. This prospect was an option that the Czechoslovak government deliberately pursued. President Benesch reiterated this on various occasions in the spring of 1938. In a conversation with British General E. L. Spears, for example, he explained that the Soviet Union had
On March 13, 1938, they claimed to have received a promise of an absolute minimum of one thousand military aircraft. Airfields to accommodate these aircraft were already being prepared.[39] The Czech Communist newspaper predicted that in the event of war, thirty thousand Soviet bombers would fly over Berlin, and the Czech Social Democrats considered one thousand four hundred Soviet aircraft to be a realistic figure. From Paris, the deputy director of the political department of the Foreign Ministry, René Massigli, reminded his English colleagues several times in the summer of 1938 "that the French General Staff would consider the territory of Czechoslovakia as a possible base for French air strikes on German conurbations."([40]) So when Ribbentrop and Hitler repeatedly spoke of Czechoslovakia as a military threat, this was, under the circumstances, a reflection of the facts.

Threatening news regarding armament policy also came from other quarters in Berlin during those days and weeks. In Washington, President Roosevelt signed the Naval Expansion Bill on May 17, 1938, which authorized the largest armament program ever for the US Navy, with a budget of $1.15 billion. In London, the new air armament project Scheme L was approved at the end of April, which provided for the construction of 12,000 fighter planes within two years, and in Paris, the Daladier government announced in May that it would double the French military budget.[41] Now that the Czech "war in sight" crisis had just proven how a European war against Germany could break out without the active involvement of the Berlin government, and that the military situation would quickly deteriorate under such circumstances, the head of the dictatorship in the capital felt compelled to take countermeasures. On May 24, Hitler ordered the accelerated construction of fortifications on the western border; he also ordered the rapid continuation of the construction of the two battleships Bismarck and Tirpitz.[42] In addition, he considered expanding the submarine construction program and informed his generals that he intended to crush Czechoslovakia in the foreseeable future.

---

[39] See F. O. 371/21716, p. 324 f. and FO 800/309, p. 133, report on the meeting between Spears and Benesch and *Spears* and *Halifax* on March 21, 1938, as well as *Franke*, London, p. 232.

[40] See F. O. 371/21728, p. 17, (R. I. *Campbell* to *Strang*, July 13, 1938); F. O. 317 21731, p. 42, (R. I. *Campbell* to *Sargent*, August 13, 1939), quoted here from *Franke*, London, p. 234.

[41] For all three cases, see *Tooze*, Economy, p. 295.

[42] See *Tooze*, Economy, p. 296 f.

The risk for the Western powers in the event of a war they intended to wage should be as high as possible. Ribbentrop's task in the following months was to make this risk the core of Germany's foreign policy rhetoric.

The German-Czech crises did not occur in isolation, nor did they affect only the well-known treaty partners and major powers in the East and West. In the meantime, another country had already recognized the impending crisis and wanted to take advantage of it. In the spring of 1938, it was the Polish army that actually marched up to the Czech border instead of the German armed forces.[43]Ribbentrop's appointment and the end of the Republic of Austria's independence naturally also had repercussions for Poland. From the perspective of other states, times like these, when entire countries disappeared, always presented opportunities. The Polish ambassador to Berlin, Josef Lipski, took a few days to respond after Ribbentrop's appointment. But then he came on
On March 12, 1938, via State Secretary Weizsäcker, he approached the German Foreign Ministry, announcing an initial visit to Ribbentrop, during which he intended to provide information about the latest Polish-Italian contacts during Foreign Minister Beck's visit to Rome. However, he immediately informed Weizsäcker of the main points, emphasizing the most important aspect, namely "the necessity of involving Poland if a new viable arrangement is to be created in Europe."(44)

This initially signaled Poland's claims to participate in the restructuring of Eastern Central Europe, which, in addition to the Austrian crisis at the time, also referred to the ongoing Polish-Lithuanian conflict over Vilnius. On March 18, Lipski personally addressed Ribbentrop and presented him with the Polish note, which demanded that Lithuania recognize the cession of Vilnius and resume diplomatic relations. The opportunity should be seized to settle the long-standing dispute over this city, which had been smoldering since the 1920s, in Poland's favor. Ribbentrop approved the demand. He had previously advised the Lithuanians and their ambassador to accept it and merely reminded Lipski that he wanted to be informed in advance of any further Polish actions in the future. Lipski himself had already promised this to Hermann Göring, who had been regularly involved in German-Polish relations since the Neurath era and continued to do so. Lipski promised to provide information, "even during the night if necessary."(45)

---

43 See PA AA R 28881, p. 78573, record of a message from the German Consulate General in Katowice dated April 23, 1938.

44 Other points included: "Recognition of the importance of the Rome-Berlin axis for European politics; recognition of the importance of the German-Polish agreement of 1934; ... expansion of economic and cultural relations between Rome and Warsaw." Quoted from PA AA R 28881, p. 78550, *Weizsäcker's* notes dated March 12, 1938.

45 Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78552, *Ribbentrop's* notes from March 18, 1938. Cf. also ADAP, D, V, Doc. 334. A week later, *Lipski* visited *Weizsäcker* and praised

There appeared to be a convergence of German and Polish interests in the case of Lithuania. What Ribbentrop and Lipski had discussed or might have discussed beyond that was the subject of much speculation. In connection with this conversation, there was a rumor about a total settlement between Poland and Germany. The press attaché of the Swedish legation and Swedish journalist Jäderlund reported its content as follows:

> "In 'Ribbentrop's office,' a new border between Germany and Poland was drawn up, down to the smallest detail. This new border abolished the corridor, but left Poland with the free port of Gdynia and a railway line to Gdynia that was exempt from German customs jurisdiction. In return, Poland was assured a free hand in the east (for territorial expansion), i.e., vis-à-vis Russia and Lithuania. (In Lithuania, this even included the Memel region!) Poland agreed to this project, which would be implemented when the opportunity arose"(46)

A report by Ribbentrop's office recorded this without commenting further on the content. In itself, such an agreement would have been perfectly possible according to Ribbentrop's usual "secular"standards. It is also quite possible that this proposal was outlined in exactly this way in the office. Parts of it, such as the guaranteed Polish free port in Gdynia, including an extraterritorial railway line to it, later became part of the mediation proposals presented to Great Britain and Poland before the war began. However, as a newly appointed minister, Ribbentrop was already considering the possibilities for a long-term German-Polish settlement based on the Italian-German model. In a memo dated March 17, 1938, the day before the Lipski talks, he explicitly mentioned "Lithuania as compensation for the return of the corridor to Germany" in this context. (48)He later made an additional attempt to divert Poland's hunger for land towards the east.

---

once again his own government and spoke of "further questions" that Poland still had with Lithuania. When *Weizsäcker* asked what these were, "he failed to provide an answer." Instead, he made the ridiculous claim that the Lithuanian question "had revealed Moscow's current powerlessness." See PA AA R 28881, p. 78555, note by *Weizsäcker* dated March 26, 1938.

46 See PA-AA R 27090, p. 28919, DR report dated March 21, 1938. The continued good information provided by the long-standing reporter *Jäderlund* led *Joseph Goebbels* to persuade *Hitler* to implement prior censorship of all foreign reporting in February 1945. See *Schmidt,* Diary, draft curriculum vitae from August 1947, p. 15.

47*JvR* also occasionally emphasized this term in negotiations with Poland. See Polish White Paper, Doc. 53, p. 74, *Count Szembek's* notes on *Ribbentrop's* stay in Warsaw on February 1, 1939.

48 See ADAP, D, V, Doc. 329, p. 362. According to this record *by JvR,* in the event of a Polish occupation of Lithuania without compensation negotiations, German troops should at least secure the Memel Territory. The military then proposed to him that, in this case, Lithuania should be occupied up to a German-Polish "demarcation line" that extended beyond the Memel region. See ADAP, D, V, Doc. 333, *Keitel* to *Ribbentrop*, March 18, 1938. The Polish White Paper on the history leading up to the war is completely silent on this phase of German-Polish relations.

in a conversation with Poland's Foreign Minister Beck. [49] With regard to Lithuania, such a compromise would even have been in line with the plans pursued by the Western powers shortly after the First World War. The Memel Territory, which had been part of Prussian-German territory for centuries, had been separated in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles without any particular justification and was to be placed at the free disposal of the powers. It was actually intended to serve as the eastern river mouth and sea access for a united Polish-Lithuanian state.[50]Only the surprising consolidation of the Republic of Lithuania as an independent state had prevented this development. Since Poland did not share a border with the Memel Territory and the Western capitals could not even bring themselves to agree on a pro-German revision of the treaty provisions at this location, which was actually of little interest from the Paris and London perspective, the Allies finally allowed Lithuania to occupy and effectively annex the territory.

At the end of March 1938, Lipski came by again and complained about the new German census law of October 4, 1937, which asked about ethnicity as an extension "for other purposes." He suggested that this could violate the German-Polish Minority Protection Agreement signed on the day of the Hoßbach meeting, in which Hitler had accused the Republic of Poland of having intentions to attack Germany at any time. Lipski believed that it was difficult for individuals to openly declare their nationality, partly because "human will cannot determine membership of an ethnic group, as this is determined solely by characteristics such as ancestry, blood and mother tongue."([51])Apparently, there were concerns in Warsaw that the frequently made claim of the existence of a Polish minority in Germany could be undermined by the planned German census of
May 15, 1938 become irrelevant. Lipski also proposed an extension of the German-Polish agreement of 1934. Ribbentrop was skeptical about this and responded with an invitation to Poland to join the Anti-Comintern Pact.

---

[49] "I could imagine that, in the event of a generally generous settlement of all problems between Poland and us, we would be quite willing to consider the Ukrainian question as a privilege of Poland." See ADAP, D, V, Doc. 120, p. 132 f., *Ribbentrop's* notes on the conversation with *Beck* on January 9, 1939. *Beck* replied "laughingly" that Polish aspirations to Kiev naturally remained. The Polish White Paper only provides an "excerpt from *Beck's* notes" on the meeting, which does not mention this point. See Polish White Paper, Doc. 49, p. 71 f.

[50] According to Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles, this territory was not assigned to any particular state, nor was a referendum planned, nor was the people there guaranteed any form of self-government. It was at the free disposal of the "allied and associated principal powers," with Germany undertaking to recognize any further decision on the matter of nationality. See *Hohlfeld,* Documents, vol. 3, p. 43.

[51] Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78559, note in connection with the *Lipski-Ribbentrop* meeting.

pact, his secret deterrent front against Great Britain. Lipski did not say yes, but he did not say no either.[52]

While the Czech crisis had reached its first climax, the British government took a first significant step toward winning Poland as an ally. To this end, the First Lord of the Admiralty undertook an extensive Baltic Sea cruise in the summer of 1938. During this cruise, Duff Cooper met with
August 8 in Gdynia with Polish Foreign Minister Beck, where they stayed for two days. It became one of those meetings that was later shrouded in a strange silence, even though there is no doubt about its fundamental importance. During those days and in those talks, the Anglo-Polish alliance began to take shape. This was pointed out after the war by Edward Raczynski, the Polish ambassador to London, and none other than the then British Foreign Secretary Halifax agreed with him in his foreword. This is plausible insofar as the talks there represent the early form of the idea of an Anglo-Polish condominium over the Baltic region, which was later taken up again when the two states concluded a treaty in 1939, placing a whole series of states under the guarantee of both states. These negotiations represented the origin of the Anglo-Polish alliance, which was therefore not due to the events in Munich, the German pressure on the Polish government in the fall of 1938, or even the occupation of Prague in the spring of 1939. It was a fact that was accelerated by these events, but had already been initiated.

Joseph Beck, the head of Polish foreign policy, pursued the plan to
"to be able to switch sides to the Allies within 24 hours."(54) It had already been drafted before the Munich Conference. The Danzig negotiations, during which the price for this change of sides was apparently negotiated for the first time, were not taken into account in the official presentation of British policy, the Documents on British Foreign Policy.[55] Even Edward Raczynski, in his memoirs published fifteen years later, made no mention of this origin of the Anglo-Polish alliance.(56)

---

[52] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78556 ff. *Ribbentrop's* notes from March 31, 1938.

[53] *Halifax* told Polish Chargé d'Affaires *Jazdzewski* that he had read the report on the conversation with great interest. See *Cooper*, War, p. 271, and *Colvin*, Vansittart, p. 246.

[54] See *Roos*, Poland, p. 347.

[55] According to *Colvin*, *Beck* gave a brief summary of the conversation to Mr. *Clifford Norton*, *Vansittart's* former private secretary and current counsellor at the British Embassy in Warsaw, on August 30. See *Colvin*, Vansittart, p. 247.

[56] Cf. *Raczynski*, London, p. 7. Although he wrote his memoirs in diary form, he published only a single entry for the period from June 2, 1937, to October 19, 1938, dated July 25, 1938, which deals generally with Anglo-Polish talks and a dinner hosted by Prime Minister *Chamberlain* at the Polish Embassy on June 14, 1938. He then dealt with the Czechoslovak crisis in a later account dated October 20, 1938, which also makes no mention of the Anglo-Polish talks in Danzig.

However, it is possible that the diplomatic papers later captured in Warsaw finally drew the German government's attention to these connections. Ribbentrop's lengthy explanations, with which he sought to persuade his Turkish counterparts to cooperate more closely in the summer of 1941, included a review of this period:

> "England, however, had already decided on war. We know today that the decision had been made long before, even before the Munich Agreement. Later, the English gave the Poles a guarantee, and from that moment on, there was nothing more to be done with Poland; they imagined that Germany was isolated and that, covered by the English guarantee, they could reject any German demand."[57]

These justifications by Ribbentrop, in which he did not fail to point out that he was wrongly regarded "in some circles as the Führer's 'evil genius' with regard to foreign policy," were a recurring feature of his foreign policy discussions. This could only have an indirect influence on German-Turkish relations. Nevertheless, Ribbentrop's statements give an impression of how intensively Germany's foreign policy leadership was thinking about how it had actually got into this situation in 1941. Hitler, too, repeatedly discussed the course of events in public speeches and, as late as the spring of 1945, reflected on it in the "Bormann Dictations" in a manner that Carl J. Burckhardt, for example, considered quite typical and as special proof of the authenticity of the record.

Ribbentrop himself had no particular relationship with Poland. Before becoming foreign minister, he had never undertaken any personal diplomatic visits there, as he had done to England or France, and there is little evidence of any private contacts or significant dealings with Polish personalities. [59]However, on July 3, 1935, Ribbentrop had taken part in a meeting between Beck and Lipski on the Polish side, Neurath as minister, Göring as prime minister, and

---

[57] Quoted from ADAP, D, XIII/2, Appendix I, p. 824, July 13, 1941. *Ribbentrop's* conversation with the envoy to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, *Açikalin,* in the presence of the Turkish ambassador Gerede.

[58] Like so many key documents from the inner circle of National Socialism, the Bormann dictations have only been preserved as copies of a lost transcript of a lost original and are therefore third-hand sources.

[59]The Polish "White Paper" published after the outbreak of war contains a "record by *Count Szembek* of his conversation with Foreign Minister Ribbentrop" dated August 1936. *Ribbentrop,* who at that time was still a year and a half away from becoming foreign minister, is said to have referred to their shared anti-Bolshevism and the need for German-Polish understanding. See White Paper, Doc. 25, p. 42. In addition to such obvious misdating, the Polish
"White Paper" contains, in addition to such obvious misdating, other "records" *by Szembek* that are not found in his "journal," such as individual paragraphs in documents 22 and 29.

Hitler, on the other hand, participated. [60]The main topic of discussion at the time was the Eastern Pact proposed by France, which both sides rejected. However, Hitler also brought up the increasing number of Soviet air forces and their deployment options in Czechoslovakia, while Ribbentrop contented himself with a brief interjection about the growing Soviet influence in France during the long round of talks.

Trips to Poland were mainly a matter for Hermann Göring's secondary foreign policy. Otherwise, after the conclusion of the 1934 non-aggression pact in Berlin, Poland was considered a reasonably friendly state and potential ally, and therefore not an urgent matter. It was a matter for a few organizations, none of which were particularly influential in Germany, to document the negative aspects of German-Polish relations. Ribbentrop only became involved in Polish affairs after he took office as foreign minister.

While Anglo-Polish contacts were taking their course in the summer of 1938, the British government came up with a proposal on the diplomatic stage that reminded Ribbentrop once again where the problems lay. In order to have the final say in the German-Czech crisis, London wanted to send a mission to Czechoslovakia, headed by a Mr. Runciman. On July 25, 1938 Ambassador Henderson first raised this intention with Ernst von Weizsäcker. Runciman was to act as an "independent advisor" and mediate in the conflict. This was a typically English proposal, which primarily served to remind the disputing parties, especially the German government, that London wanted to have the final say. The aim was to draw new borders in Central Europe, and it was to be determined by England where these borders were to run. Consequently, the Runciman Mission itself lacked even the slightest hint of international law standards. The Treaty of Versailles? Concerns about the international legal status of Czechoslovakia as a member of the League of Nations? National self-determination of the various ethnic groups living in Czechoslovakia? Referendums? None of this was even considered in the English proposal. Although it is almost universally described in the literature as
It was seen as a "compromise proposal" and a signal of détente from Britain, but this mission remained completely uncompromising on one crucial point: political problems in Central Europe should not be decided on the basis of written international law or natural law, but on the basis of power politics – and the power for these considerations lay in London. What is more, to put it bluntly, an English gentleman with no official position or knowledge was to travel through Central Europe and then tell the natives there how to achieve justice between them.

---

[60] See PA AA R 28881, pp. 78789–78805, unsigned record dated July 3, 1935.

[61] See ADAP, D, II, Doc. 313, *Henderson-Weizsäcker* conversation.

He was to travel through the territory of Czechoslovakia, a member of the League of Nations, and decide at his discretion how relations between Germans and Czechs should be regulated there in the future. Lord Walter Runciman had not previously been familiar with comparable tasks as an expert and was able to approach his task unencumbered by any prior knowledge. From Ribbentrop's point of view, Runciman's appointment had a special significance. In his "main report" the previous December, he had mentioned Runciman as the person who had been commissioned with a mission to the United States in early 1937 to shape relations there in the British interest. The ultimate goal was "undoubtedly to win America back as an ally in the event of a European conflict."([63])

This man was now traveling through Central Europe on a special mission. The associated English claim meant exactly what Hitler and Ribbentrop wanted to avoid. For Hitler in particular, the German-Czech border ran right through what he considered and claimed to be the traditional territory of the German Reich. In principle, no other state should be able to determine how the state affairs there were to be organized. He wanted to enforce this claim. Here, the English and German claims to power clashed directly, with the link to international law standards of national self-determination in 1938 being only a means, not an end.

Before the German-Czech crisis reached its climax at the end of September 1938, the Nazi Party Congress was once again held in Nuremberg, where Hitler was to deliver an aggressive speech against the Czechoslovak head of state. Meanwhile, Ribbentrop's old acquaintance Ernest Tennant was staying at a hotel in Nuremberg. He was still observing the German scene and reporting to the British Foreign Office and individual ministers. In [the] meantime, however, he had the opportunity to intervene, at least indirectly, in a completely different way in internal German affairs. During the party congress, the well-known circle of conspirators associated with the names Halder, von Weizsäcker, Kleist-Schmenzin, Kordt, and Goerdeler met in his Nuremberg hotel rooms.

It was a piquant detail that it was Tennant, of all people, who had opened many doors for Ribbentrop in the early phase of Nazi foreign policy and

---

[62] *Walter Runciman* (1870–1949), Liberal Member of Parliament since 1899, President of the Board of Trade with interruptions since 1914, withdrew from this post and active politics after *Neville Chamberlain* took office and was elevated to Viscount Runciman of Doxford.

[63] See *Ribbentrop's* main report in: PA-AA R 28895a, p. 4.

[64] *Tennant* also mentions *Hans Oster*, *Admiral Canaris, Count Erich von Brockdorff-Ahlefeld*, *Colonel Bohm-Tettelbach*, and *Hjalmar Schacht* as further names, who would have been contacted on the English side by *Horace Wilson* or *Julian Piggott*, without naming those present in Nuremberg in detail. See *Tennant*, Account, p. 198 ff.

Ribbentrop had even asked for reports from Berlin to London after 1936, was now also working to overthrow the German government. Many members of the Anglo-German Fellowship (AGF) were active in this regard, while their German counterparts, the German-English Society (DEG), attempted less conspiratorial methods and embarrassed the AGF with numerous invitations and offers to open local offices. The DEG then hoped to receive invitations and opportunities to establish offices in England, but this was apparently not desired by Tennant and Co. or could not be achieved with the resources available. However, the British Council, which was responsible for this – headed by Robert Vansittart since early 1938 – spent large amounts of money in politically irrelevant countries such as Greece, Austria, and the Balkan countries, but little or nothing in Germany.[65] Thus, German-English relations remained stuck in this area as well, even though, as Tennant wrote to the English cabinet, the DEG also offered a more subtle opportunity to correct German policy and was not without influence. [66]

In the days between Nuremberg and Munich, things took a more radical turn. The inner-German conspiracy, with the participation of the above-mentioned individuals, planned a full-scale coup d'état, including the killing or arrest of the head of state. This prospect was repeatedly held out to the British government, and was to be pursued just as relentlessly and unsuccessfully after Britain's declaration of war. Nevertheless, in the run-up to Munich, Ernest Tennant and the journalist Ward Price casually discussed how best to treat the Germans after they had been defeated in the coming war. The German conspiratorial circles undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of such discussions, albeit unwittingly. They saw themselves as the other Germany and offered their potential enemies a well-intentioned message that they wanted to build a conservative Germany based on the rule of law. In their view, this would be more acceptable to British politicians than a National Socialist empire, even though the conspiracy did not distance itself from its power-political ambitions for a Greater Germany including a colonial empire. In August 1938, a "Monsieur de K.", presumably Kleist-Schmenzin, had visited Churchill's private residence at Chartwell and announced the creation of a monarchy in Germany, which he said could be achieved within forty-eight hours by a military coup. The generals, including Reichenau, were in favor of peace. To Churchill's lasting astonishment, he then mentioned what Churchill considered a possible reward for the coup...

---

[65] See *Tennant*, Account, p. 200. German disappointment with the AGF led to the founding of a new organization called "The Link," whose members wanted to be more responsive to the concerns of the DEG, but which gained a reputation for being pro-German agents. See *Tennant*, Account, p. 204.

[66] See *Tennant*, Account, p. 200 ff., report from February 1939.

[67] See *Tennant*, Account, p. 206 f.

nonchalantly dismissed the colonial issue raised in the agreement and instead demanded the Polish Corridor. Churchill dismissed this with the argument that it could drive Poland into Hitler's camp, who had ultimately publicly renounced the corridor.[68] In fact, in 1938/39, there were occasional tendencies among conservative circles in the Foreign Office and the military to outflank Hitler and Ribbentrop's policy on Poland, so to speak. In practice, however, these opposition circles primarily undermined the essential foreign policy argument that Ribbentrop was working with during those months: deterrence. A state which the London government could not only safely assume would have a much more limited war potential than its own, but in which the highest circles in the military and foreign policy also wanted to overthrow the regime, could hardly have a deterrent effect. Neville Chamberlain ultimately expected an "internal collapse" of the Nazi regime in the fall of 1939 and, against this backdrop, had what he considered to be good reasons for doing so. Josef Lipski, who was still the Polish ambassador in Berlin on August 31, 1939, also declared on the eve of the outbreak of war that the Polish army would certainly be in Berlin within a few weeks due to a coup and internal unrest in Germany:

> "He knew the situation in Germany well after five and a half years as ambassador and had close ties to Göring and others in influential circles; he said he was convinced that in the event of war, unrest would break out in this country and Polish troops would successfully march on Berlin."(69)

Ribbentrop's deterrence scenario had not worked. The war he had announced for this eventuality did indeed take place, but the Polish march on Berlin did not materialize. However, from the perspective of the summer of 1938, the path ahead was still fraught with uncertainty. Meanwhile, the general tension since the Czech bluff with the mobilization against non-existent German troop concentrations on May 21 had not subsided. A few days later, Hitler had announced internally that he now wanted to crush Czechoslovakia in the foreseeable future under any circumstances. A corresponding plan, "Green," was drawn up. For the time being

Immediately after the German-Czech crisis in May, Polish Ambassador Lukasiewicz reported from Paris on how the mood there had changed as a result of the events and for various other reasons. Under no circumstances could the crisis be considered over. Instead, France's readiness for war had grown considerably and would continue to grow.

---

[68] *K.* reacted contritely and once again expressed the military's urgent desire for the corridor. See CHAR 2/340 B, pp. 192–194, August 19, 1938, Note of Conversation at Chartwell House between Monsieur *de K.* and Mr. *Winston Churchill.* The record was also forwarded to *Anthony Eden*.

[69] Quoted in *Dahlerus,* Versuch, p. 110.

sen. France would not stay out of the affairs in Central Europe and would take a "firm stance" toward Germany. Lukasiewicz referred to information from his American colleague Bullitt, who had "numerous and active connections with French circles" and whose advice to Roosevelt would later lead to Chamberlain's accusations against the US and "world Jewry." Lukasiewicz himself saw the causes in much the same way as his Washington colleague Potocki would later do:

"It is difficult to name the decisive reasons for this development. The most important role was probably played by the large-scale intensification of propaganda from Jewish and communist circles. They came to the conclusion that a possible Czech-German conflict would be a good opportunity to declare war on Hitlerism, which is abhorred by these elements."[70]

Lukasiewicz had thus accurately conveyed Churchill's intentions, but he had no information—or at least did not share any such information with his foreign minister at this point—that would have proven the direct involvement of British circles. Lukasiewicz was not the only one who recognized the value of a German-Czech war for the principal opponents of National Socialism. Ribbentrop's ministerial colleague Schwerin-Krosigk reported in very similar terms to the German head of state:

"We can therefore only gain by waiting. That is why the communists, Jews, and Czechs are *so* fanatically eager to rush us into war. For they see the current situation as the *last* chance that the Czech question could lead to a world conflagration and the world conflagration to the destruction of the hated Third Reich."[71]

On the other hand, Schwerin-Krosigk's urgent letter also gave cause for reflection and acceleration. He cited arguments that Hitler would take up again in the weeks following the Munich Agreement:

"Even if Chamberlain and Halifax did not want war, behind them stand Churchill/Eden as driving forces and, if necessary, successors. The fact that England has not completed its military armament would not prevent England from entering the war."[72]

The latter was the case because, firstly, England was "all too aware" of Germany's economic weakness and, secondly, it could safely count on the United States entering the war with its "war industry of unimaginable capacity." This would be prepared by Jewish journalists and would also lead the US out of its rampant economic crisis. But even if an England with weak armaments under the government of the inscrutable but rather peace-loving Chamberlain was most likely to

---

[70] Quoted from *Lukasiewicz*, Diplomat, p. 99, report from *Lukasiewicz* to *Beck* dated May 28, 1938.

[71] From a letter from Finance Minister *Schwerin-Krosigk* to *Hitler* dated September 1, 1938, cited in IMT, XXXVI, Doc. 419-EC, p. 497.

[72] From a letter from Finance Minister *Schwerin-Krosigk* to *Hitler* dated September 1, 1938, cited in IMT, XXXVI, Doc. 419-EC, p. 496.

If war were to break out, the question naturally arose as to what kind of war policy a well-armed England under a prime minister named Churchill or Eden might pursue. Schwerin-Krosigk's letter served to reinforce Hitler's and Ribbentrop's fears of an English war against Germany, which had already been decided upon. In light of subsequent events, Hitler interpreted Chamberlain's concessions in Munich, combined with his immediate call for increased British rearmament, as a mere deception. For years, he had sent Ribbentrop to Paris and London to offer to meet with a Western head of government anywhere and without any preconditions. All these attempts had been unsuccessful, with some of the rejections coming very suddenly and under questionable pretexts. Now Chamberlain, an English prime minister, had actually boarded a plane to meet Hitler. What could he want? In Berchtesgaden, they found it hard to believe that this could be anything other than a peace mission, and they soon felt vindicated.

So much has been written about the Munich negotiations that there is no need to go into detail here. Both sides went to the brink of war, which some people, especially in Great Britain, wanted. Among the German emigrants in London, Heinrich Brüning was one of those who learned this. Although the former German Chancellor had been living in England for years and had already been treated harshly by Churchill in 1934 with the words,
"Germany must be defeated again, and this time for good,"[73]he had not recognized the full brutal seriousness of this announcement, at least not until the moment when he told Churchill that he had forwarded certain compromise proposals to Foreign Minister Halifax via Lord Lothian. These essentially amounted to reminding the Prague government of its promise made at Versailles to establish a cantonal system in which national self-determination would be possible in a kind of "second Switzerland." Territory should only be ceded to Germany in an emergency, and according to Brüning, this should in no way impair Czechoslovakia's ability to defend itself:

> Churchill became extremely agitated. He led me into the garden, where he called me a coward and declared that he would never make even the slightest compromise with these individuals. I replied that it was unjustified to call me, who had been persecuted and threatened with death by the Nazi mob, a coward, and that the security of the British Empire was the primary concern. Churchill immediately relented, but I continued, saying that he could be sure that in the event of war, the initial successes of the German army would be astonishing, although I had no doubt that it would be defeated in a long war, since England would receive help from the United States, at least in the form of supplies, and since the Nazis did not have a sufficient economic base to win a long war in Europe. He made another sharp remark:

---

[73] Quoted from *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 31.

"What we want is for the German economy to be completely destroyed." I replied, "That means that after a certain period of time, you will have to rebuild the country to support the fight against the Russians."[74]

But Churchill and his colleagues were unable to prevail in London against Neville Chamberlain, who believed that military support for Czechoslovakia was out of the question given the state of its armaments. The central issue was not whether Czechoslovakia could be defended in practical terms, but rather the military capacity of the Western powers to act in a potentially protracted conflict. Chamberlain was a "39er" and a hard-nosed politician who, if war was inevitable, did not want it to start a day earlier than necessary, and if possible without losses and in any case not out of mere political ambition. Ribbentrop had correctly described these circumstances in his reports. However, this also meant a certain confirmation of German fears. From the outside, one could view Chamberlain's willingness to compromise as merely a maneuver to gain time. A letter from Chamberlain to his sister in March 1938 also supports this interpretation from the inside. He wrote:

"We cannot help Czechoslovakia—it would simply be a pretext for war with Germany. That is out of the question*, unless we had a reasonable prospect of bringing it to its knees within a reasonable time*, and I see no sign of that."(75)

Seen in this light, Chamberlain's appearance in Munich could be interpreted as an attempt not to let the "pretext" of Czechoslovakia disappear completely, so that it would still be available for better opportunities. The British zeal for rearmament, which had intensified after Munich and was loudly proclaimed by Chamberlain, also became a constant topic of discussion in German-British talks at all levels. Neville Chamberlain had exposed himself very strongly in domestic politics with his ambiguous signature on the Munich Agreement. In a conversation with Fritz Hesse, one of Chamberlain's associates, his long-time press secretary and advisor George S. Steward, suggested against this backdrop that the armament campaign that was now underway was a domestic political maneuver and, according to Hesse's interpretation, raised the idea of a four-power declaration limiting armaments to their current level. This would "stabilize the pro-German sentiment in Great Britain."(76)However, this remained an idea that, even according to Hesse's report, had only been hinted at. This was contrasted by other points on which Steward had been very clear:

"The source (i.e., Steward, author's note) expressly pointed out to me that there was an extremely bitter mood against us throughout the Foreign Office. He believed me...

---

74 Quoted from *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 207.

75 *Chamberlain* on March 20, 1938, quoted here from *Kershaw*, Freunde, p. 263, emphasis added.

76 Cf. ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 251, p. 265 ff., *Hesse's* notes of October 11, 1938.

> to ensure that Germany, and Ribbentrop in particular, had sworn 'revenge' there. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by this; in all future actions, it would be important for all major matters to be dealt with directly, bypassing the Foreign Office and Sir Nevile Henderson, as it had unfortunately become apparent that the latter was not entirely reliable when it came to transmitting messages. Furthermore, Henderson would always involve the Foreign Office, which would run the risk of losing all inhibitions (sic) and causing unwanted publicity."([77])

Henderson's ambassadorship in Berlin, which, as we have seen, was the result of suggestions made by Chamberlain's political opponents such as Eden and Vansittart, caused problems for the Prime Minister. Henderson either lacked political self-confidence or valued other commitments more highly than those to the head of government in order to be truly trustworthy in his eyes. If Chamberlain now wanted to use Steward to point out ways of taking a more discreet approach to German-English affairs, he had not chosen quite the right method. Although Hesse's note seemed "particularly important" to Dirksen, the ambassador in London, and he sent it to the Foreign Office a day later as an attachment to a letter to Ribbentrop,[78] it still had to pass the State Secretary on its way to the Minister. So it was up to Ernst von Weizsäcker and one of the Kordt brothers, and thus to the Ribbentrop-critical conspiracy within the Foreign Office and the Chamberlain-critical circles in the Foreign Office, to decide how things would proceed. Since neither of them wanted to be sidelined, the outcome could hardly have been different from what Weizsäcker reported to Dirksen:

> I must confess that even before I spoke with Dr. Kordt (sic), I was somewhat hesitant to forward the letter to the Reich Minister as it stands. If you insist, I will of course do so, but on the other hand I wonder whether Dr. Hesse's arguments are not too pronounced in a direction that is not the one taken here."([79])

Dirkensen's response has not been preserved, and Ribbentrop apparently did not receive Hesse's notes on the background discussion with Steward. This was less important, however, as he had already internalized the fundamental message that no policy should be made with his diplomatic colleagues at the Foreign Office. Nevertheless, this meant that a fairly direct attempt by Chamberlain to establish contact was formally sabotaged by the Foreign Office, which could have improved the negative impression Ribbentrop and Hitler had of developments within Britain. According to the Allied Publication Committee on German Foreign Policy, Ribbentrop withdrew almost completely from German-British politics in the months that followed. The volume covering the period from October 1938 to February 1939 contains hardly any documentation.

---

[77] Quoted from ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 251, p. 266, *Hesse's* notes from October 11, 1938.

[78] Cf. ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 251, p. 265, Appendix I, letter *from Dirksen* to *Ribbentrop* dated October 12, 1938.

[79] Cf. ADAP, D, IV, Doc. 254, p. 271, letter *from Weizsäcker* to *Dirksen* dated October 17, 1938.

ment in which Ribbentrop commented on these issues within the framework of the Foreign Office or took a position in writing. It was not until February that Ribbentrop held talks with Ambassador Henderson and the Director of the Economic Department at the Foreign Office, Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, which are documented there. These will be discussed elsewhere. Hitler was understandably satisfied with his chief diplomat after the Munich Agreement. His annoyance at the side effects of the Munich events only set in later. Immediately after the conference, he praised Ribbentrop and the "new style of diplomats" in general:

> "Even Bismarck had to fight against bureaucracy, and even today, the National Socialist government still has to assert itself against bureaucracy. It was worst in the Foreign Office. Diplomats were not representatives of their countries, but rather members of an international social class. This evil could not be remedied overnight in the Foreign Office; rather, it would take 10 to 15 years until the young diplomats trained in National Socialism had matured. The first and so far only diplomatic representative of the Third Reich abroad who understood how to conduct himself properly abroad and represent the new Germany there was Ribbentrop. He was the ideal model that he, the Führer, had in mind for a diplomat. In recent months, he had shown energy, toughness, courage, and nerves, thereby instilling inner confidence in the German people during the Czech crisis. Ribbentrop was a diplomat of a new style. Another good representative of his country in London was 'little Jean Masaric' (sic), who had also fought for his country."([80])

Incidentally, he had accurately described the isolation to which JvR was subjected within the Foreign Office. Ernst von Weizsäcker and others actually believed themselves to be in a class of their own. Insofar as they shared the plans for Greater German expansion, they would have preferred to see them directed against Poland rather than Czechoslovakia. Weizsäcker also very quickly had the opportunity to become involved in Polish affairs, but initially in a defensive role, contrary to expectations. In the run-up to the Munich Agreement, the Republic of Poland had taken great care to keep itself and its demands in the discussion. The Pilsudskists in Polish foreign policy were largely in agreement about their goals and methods. On September 15, 1938, the Berlin ambassador Lipski telephoned Weizsäcker in Berchtesgaden to tell him on behalf of Foreign Minister Beck that, in the event of a plebiscite on the Sudeten question, Poland would "categorically demand appropriate treatment of the Teschen region." [We]izsäcker merely took note of this demand and suggested that the Polish government contact London, which Lipski agreed to do.

On September 22, the Polish government finally handed over a corresponding note in Prague and published a communiqué that was signed by the "Czechi-

---

[80] Quoted in PA AA R 27091, p. 29048.

[81] Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78584, *Weizsäcker's* note of September 17, 1938.

Czech invasion of the Polish territory in Silesia-Teschen," which had been legalized by the decision of the Ambassadors' Conference of July 28, 1920, spoke of the Czech breach of contract, of the failure to take Polish rights into account in the Anglo-French negotiations of
September 18, 1938, and that all states "which have had established rights and responsibilities in this part of Europe for centuries" should work together.

In connection with the advance in Teschen, the Polish government also achieved its own goal for the first time. Polish embassy counselor Lubomirski spoke with Woermann about the border demarcation, as there were contradictions between the German and Polish views. Lubomirski stated bluntly that "there could be no factual disagreement on this matter, since the Oder River formed the border, meaning that everything east of the Oder belonged to the Polish sphere."[83] Neither Woermann nor other German authorities had ever heard of this, and he took "no position on the matter." There it was, clearly stated: the Polish claim to the Oder border, which in the following months would soon develop loudly and rapidly along the river toward the north. Plans for ethnic cleansing were included. When Polish troops arrived in the Teschen area two days later, one of the first measures taken was to close the municipal schools where German was the language of instruction and remove all German inscriptions. These were signs of a fundamental conflict. The Foreign Office struggled to respond. On
On October 4, Weizsäcker wrote to Ribbentrop on this matter, specifically the case of the city of Oderberg, stating that "our claims are still to be asserted with the Poles today." There were no other agreements, not even with Göring, who had confirmed this to him. When confronted by Woermann on the same day, Lipski acted very surprised. Nevertheless, he referred to Göring and even to Weizsäcker, contrary to the facts, and announced that he did not intend to forward Woermann's protest to Warsaw, not even a message about the conversation itself. Ribbentrop did not want to decide anything here and decided to submit the matter to Hitler himself. Hitler, on the same day,

---

[82] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78602 ff.

[83] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78618 f., *Woermann's* notes from October 3, 1938.

[84] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78643, communication from the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle dated October 5, 1938, and PA AA R 28881, p. 78648, transcript of a conversation at the Mittelstelle dated October 6, 1938, and see PA AA R 28881, pp. 78694–78699, detailed letter from the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle to *Ribbentrop,* which was also presented to the minister on November 5, 1938.

[85] This was followed by dismissals and expropriations, as had been common practice for twenty years in the former German territories of the Republic of Poland. The local German consul reported in the summer of 1939 that by autumn there would probably be no German employees left in Teschen. Anyone who wanted to leave for Germany had to promise in writing not to return. See *Blanke,* Orphans, p. 217.

[86] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78620, *Weizsäcker's* notes from October 4, 1938.

[87] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78635 ff., *Woermann's* notes dated October 4, 1938.

[88] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78639.

On the same day, he stated that he did not want to haggle with the Poles over every single city, but rather be generous toward those who were modest in their demands. In doing so, he also ignored a suggestion from the British Embassy on October 1, 1938, that the German government should use its influence to dissuade Poland from the announced invasion of Czechoslovakia. Such a move by Poland would contradict the "spirit of the Agreement reached in Munich" – from which Poland had, however, been excluded.(90)Nothing had yet been settled, neither in Czechoslovakia, nor in German-Polish relations, nor among the Big Four of Europe.

Immediately after Munich, however, things seemed to be developing well from the German point of view in the rest of Czechoslovakia. A report from Ribbentrop's office (DR), which Ribbentrop sent to Hitler, stated that the Czechs felt "betrayed and sold out" by the Western powers, their own government, and also the Soviets. Even pan-Slavic sentiments were dampened by hatred of the Poles, who were described as "traitors and vultures," and therefore the Germans were currently the least hated of all. However, further developments could not be predicted with any certainty. The report concluded with a reference to the Czech-Slovak conflict. In Prague, people were optimistic about the cohesion of the state: "But in Czech circles, there is already talk of a 'church state' that has formed in Slovakia. This refers to the strong clerical tendency that has gained ground in Bratislava, while in Prague itself, even towards the Vatican, whose attitude has also been disappointing, anti-clerical sentiments prevail."(91) As it soon became apparent, this was not the last word for all those involved.

3. Ribbentrop's reporting on the impending war

> "From October 1, 1938, I myself no longer wished for defeat, which set me apart from my friends in the resistance and a large number of editors at the Frankfurter Zeitung, although of course I could not wish for a Hitler victory either."
>
> Margret Boveri[92]

In view of what we have seen so far, it is not surprising that Ribbentrop continued to express the mistrust of Great Britain that he had outlined in

---

89 Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78645, note from *Hewel* to *Kordt* dated October 5, 1938.
90 Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78627, message from the embassy dated October 1, 1938.
91 See PA AA R 27091, pp. 29018–29021, DR report from October 1938.
92 *Margret Boveri* in a letter to *Hans Rothfels*, November 26, 1958, cited in BA-KO N 1213/1.

He continued to do so in 1939. He did this in several reports to Hitler personally, but was also opposed on this issue by a strong, albeit invisible, opposition. Even before the war, the group around Ernst von Weizsäcker and Theodor Kordt spread the rumor that JvR was actually responsible for Hitler's decision to go to war against Poland. He had persuaded the dictator that the Western powers were weak, indecisive, and would not go to war, either over Czechoslovakia or Poland. At the same time, it was widely claimed that Ribbentrop was "inciting" war, meaning that as foreign minister he had not only misinformed the head of state, but also incited him to take aggressive action. Research literature has taken up this claim to an astonishing extent, and the memoirs of numerous participants have also circulated this version, including – one is tempted to say, of course – those of later opponents of the war. Nevile Henderson, the man who suddenly became diplomatically deaf to Ribbentrop on the eve of the outbreak of war in 1939, summed up this claim in his memoirs, published posthumously in 1945, in the only place where he mentions Ribbentrop:

> "Nevertheless (referring to the British-Polish guarantee, author's note), the archvillain and warmonger Ribbentrop never stopped telling his master that we would not fight if push came to shove."[93]

Together with SS chief Heinrich Himmler, Ribbentrop was "a genuine and passionate warmonger" who pushed the hesitant Hitler over the threshold into war. We have already seen above, in the analysis of his final report as ambassador, that Ribbentrop actually described the Western powers to Hitler as thoroughly power-conscious, self-confident, and fundamentally war-ready opponents, especially England. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the claims that have been circulated, he portrayed an English war against Germany not only as a possible reaction to German policy, but as a war of aggression against Germany, whatever its behavior, that may have been planned in London for a long time. Moreover, he did not do this only in principle in this one policy report, but it can be proven that this line consistently shaped his information policy toward the dictator throughout 1939, as mentioned above.

This is evident from the documents of the "Ribbentrop Office," which, unlike the reports preserved in the Foreign Office, are available not only in carbon copies but also in the original. These are therefore the reports that Ribbentrop himself saw and worked on. They were compiled by his confidant Rudolf Likus and contained, among other things, predictions about the presumed future behavior of the Western powers. Ribbentrop had to select from the wealth of material what he wanted to forward to the dictator. Such reports are known

---

[93] Quoted from *Henderson*, Water, p. 71.

[94] For the following, see also *Kley*, Ribbentrop, p. 230 ff.

He personally marked them with an "F" using the green pen belonging to the head of the office, which signaled to the staff to forward them to the head of state and party, for whom the F stood, namely the Führer. Ribbentrop decided to submit regular reports to Hitler in which questions of British war policy were discussed, including several that seemed to argue in favor of a planned British war and saw signs of subtle preparations for war in the overall picture of the actions of the British embassies and the tendencies of the British press. Once again, historiographical fiction and historical truth are worlds apart, as is often the case with Ribbentrop.

In early July 1939, he forwarded a multi-page report from Count Toggenburg in London to the dictator. The report began by stating that
"Preparations in England in every area ... are currently such that it seems as if war is imminent."[96] The population's readiness for war is now so pronounced that it would make it impossible for the government to make any further concessions to Germany, even if it were to consider such a step. Ribbentrop informed his head of state and government that the people had long since surpassed the government in terms of readiness for war. The influence of "leading politicians" who believed that England would have to wage war against Germany if it wanted to retain its global empire was growing ever stronger:

> "The widespread view in Germany that England would have to fear losing its global empire as a result of the war is not shared here. Both the population and the leadership believe that England could very well win a war, or at least that it has a good chance of slowly wearing down Germany or rendering it powerless. ...
>
> I share the view of discerning political observers based here that England is not prepared today to accept Germany's conditions for an agreement and that England would rather go to war than yield to German pressure. Those who come over from the Reich today for information purposes are mostly very surprised and deeply impressed by England's unmistakable will to war, which they encounter everywhere."[97]

At this point, Ribbentrop may have thought of his ambassador's report from early 1938, in which he had written that it was the English

---

[95] *Ribbentrop's* press officer *Paul Schmidt* stated in a postwar testimony that the misinformation provided to *Hitler* came from the Propaganda Ministry: *"Hitler* wanted the world to be anti-Semitic – *Goebbels* brought him reports that it was. *Hitler* wanted the world to be degenerate... – *Goebbels* brought the reports that it was." See *Schmidt,* Diary, interrogation of May 28, 1946.

[96] Cf. PA AA, R 27 118/279 425 ff. (Confidential staff reports 1939) July 4, 1939. Further reports of this nature sent to *Hitler*: R 27 092/29 369 ff., April 28, 1939. See also ADAP, D, VI. No. 551 and No. 118.

[97] Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 426, report dated July 4, 1939.

It would not be impossible for the German leadership to present a war it was seeking to wage as a defensive war to the population. Although this would take time, it was entirely achievable. In the summer of 1939, the mood now seemed to have shifted in this expected direction, faster than anticipated. Ribbentrop informed his head of state of this, which of course could have ambivalent consequences, but in any case accurately described the seriousness of the situation.
"In our opinion, military preparations have reached a certain maximum level, which is not unfavorable given the overall constellation," the report continued. The optimism felt among the people was particularly striking. "England may not be able to win the war, but it certainly cannot lose it," was the current slogan. England's war potential could be significantly expanded after the start of the war, while that of Germany and Italy would soon shrink due to the trade blockade established in the event of war. The existing armed forces could be worn down by the English-French fleets, air forces, and Maginot fortifications:

> "The extensive destruction of England's cities and industrial centers by bomber aircraft is certainly expected, but this is not seen as a decisive factor as long as it is not possible to bring the land war to England itself. This is considered impossible."[98]

Propagandistically, too, the prevailing English view was that Italian, German, or Japanese political propaganda could be blocked, a view that quickly proved to be justified after the outbreak of war. To this end, the "Information Department" had already been set up in the Foreign Office under its head Lord Perth, while Robert Vansittart remained the chief coordinator behind these activities. The former permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office, who had apparently taken a back seat, had simply been assigned a new role.[99] The situation was therefore extremely dangerous: England was determined to go to war and capable of doing so, and Ribbentrop let Hitler know this, apparently selecting the pointed reports as evidence. An opinion expressed by an unnamed London employee on August 28, 1939, that there would definitely be a British declaration of war if Poland were attacked, but that London was trying to imagine the execution of the war in stages, "hardly" a "life-and-death struggle" between great powers, seemed to him a few days before the outbreak of war to be too much of a trivialization of the situation. [100]

---

98 Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 428, report dated July 4, 1939.

99 Newsweek reported on November 28, 1938, that so little was heard from *Vansittart* because he was so busy dealing with one of the "most delicate problems facing the nation": the fight against Nazi and fascist propaganda abroad. As head of the British Council of Publicity Abroad, he was making rapid progress, according to "informed circles." See Newsweek,
November 28, 1938, quoted here from *Aigner*, Chaff, Nc.

100 R 27 118/279 417, report dated August 28, 1939.

Hitler did not see this report.[101] The head of state was also spared a rumor from the British Embassy, according to which a private letter to Ambassador Henderson had accidentally found its way into the official distribution list, a letter in which it was claimed that:

> "Leading members of the English Parliament are stating ever more clearly that England must under no circumstances be drawn into a war over Polish-German differences. English interests, they say, lie elsewhere, and England may itself have its hands full in a few weeks' time dealing with its own affairs."[102]

This was precisely the tone that Ribbentrop was later so often claimed to have used when advising Hitler. It therefore stands to reason that this type of rumor was intended to create such a mood in him, which, however, did not succeed. Ribbentrop did not respond to it and did not submit this report. Instead, he regularly drew attention to the political division in the English leadership, between a war party around Churchill and Co. and a compromise-ready party around Prime Minister Chamberlain and Foreign Minister Halifax. A report dated June 20, 1939, spoke of an opposition movement against the latter, which wanted to force a cabinet reshuffle and/or a decision to form an alliance with the USSR in the near future. Public opinion would calmly await a war because propaganda and the press had restored the population's confidence in England's power and military capability. "Public opinion is basically more determined in its attitude than the government itself."([103]) This was presented to Hitler.

There was also a report dated June 13, 1939, which mentioned a "private event organized by members of the diplomatic corps in Berlin" at which
Ribbentrop informed Hitler that "representatives of the Western powers, North America, and a number of smaller Western and Northern European states" had participated, and that "a gentleman from the British Embassy had provided information on the significance of the latest speeches in the House of Commons." According to this, the embassy wanted to spread the impression that "the German claim that England was pursuing a policy of encirclement against the Reich was completely unfounded. London remained willing to reach an understanding with the Germans on the pending issues of European politics."([104]) So far, so good, but those present felt that the claim was exaggerated: "It is impossible to say whether this is just a tactic or meant seriously," a Belgian diplomat said afterwards. In journalistic circles, for example

---

[101] PA AA, R 27 118/279 435 (Confidential employee reports 1939) 4/29/39, R 27 092/29 455 7.6.39; R 27 092/29 485, 21.8.1939; R 27 118/279 417, 28.8.39.

[102] Cf. PA AA 27092, p. 29491, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 27, 1939.

[103] See PA AA 27092, p. 29485, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 20, 1939.

[104] See PA AA 27092, p. 29468, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 13, 1939.

At the Berlin office of the New York Times, no one took this seriously, as one employee there announced:

> "He himself told other foreign correspondents that this could only be a tactic on the part of the British, which is why he himself, unlike other foreign correspondents, had refused to forward such optimistic reports about alleged possibilities for understanding to his newspaper."[105]

That was the end of the report. In fact, it was actually quite transparent behavior, using demonstratively expressed optimism on the part of British politicians to give the international public the impression that any ultimate failure and conflict must clearly have been due to German misconduct. The sharp statement by the German press against Poland, after the Polish government had declared at the beginning of August that any further expression of opinion by the German government on the Danzig question would be considered a cause for war, [107] attempted to counteract this impression, but ultimately dampened the optimistic mood in the press where it existed, about which Ribbentrop also had a report submitted to Hitler.[108] In practice, Polish provocations on the Danzig question and British pseudo-optimism simultaneously served to make any aggressive statement by the German press appear to be a sign of unwillingness to compromise.

On August 1, two reports arrived from the agency, which were also presented to Hitler. One reported statements from press circles that they were increasingly certain that the Germans would have to retreat, "since there can no longer be any doubt about the position of England and France."[109] However, the Polish journalist Smogorzewski would notoriously contradict this, reject any compromise in Danzig, and emphasize Warsaw's readiness for war. Another report from August 1, 1939, claimed that Anthony Eden had developed one of those feared compromise proposals to Neville Chamberlain that would serve as a "justification or determination of war guilt reserved for history and for the 'coming Second Versailles.'" However, there were also more honest attempts

---

105 See PA AA 27092, p. 29469, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 13, 1939.

106 The funds for "propaganda abroad," which could perhaps counteract such impressions, were reduced from RM 265,000 to RM 200,000 in June 1939 by Minister of Economics *Walther Funk*. See PA AA 27092, p. 29501, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 29, 1939.

107 "The Polish government will ... regard any future interference by the German government to the detriment of these rights and interests (in Danzig, author's note) as an act of aggression." Quoted from the White Paper of the Polish Government, Doc. 86, August 10, 1939, p. 129.

108 See PA AA 27092, p. 29547 f., report by Ribbentrop's office dated August 9, 1939.

109 See PA AA 27092, p. 29543, report by Ribbentrop's office dated August 1, 1939.

110 *Smogorzewski's* activities were constantly monitored. In 1938, he published the book "Peace or War?", which was officially translated by the Berlin-Dahlem publishing office.

111 PA AA R 27 118/279 418, report dated August 1, 1939.

Halifax, Chamberlain, and Simon had decided to attempt such a move. The source reported that concessions and conditions would be involved, with the concessions including the return of Danzig to Germany, but that any stationing of German troops there would continue to be "regarded as an attack on Poland," as provided for in the Anglo-Polish agreements. In addition, serious consideration was being given to the "return" of German colonies, a step that had always been rejected on purely conceptual grounds until now. Even a "press truce" was possible. The conditions for these concessions included the conclusion of an air pact and proof of Germany's "cooperation in the European family." Domestically, there were thoughts of bringing Churchill into the cabinet to reassure the public and prevent the change of course from appearing as "capitulation." The ambassador in London had the same information from another source.

There was therefore the possibility of a compromise, but there was also a determination to go to war on the part of certain English circles. As mentioned above, this corresponded to what Ribbentrop had predicted in his final report as ambassador. In light of this information, England could therefore be, in Hitler's eyes, both the "engine driving against Germany" ([113]) and the still desired treaty and guarantee partner, as stated in the guarantee offer to the English ambassador Henderson on August 25, 1939, which Hitler had personally made. However, the last few years had repeatedly shown that such hints from London were initially followed by nothing when Berlin attempted to give them any concrete form. Thus, this message to Henderson was also to remain without consequence.

The opposite of the truth was also carefully disseminated in the world press, which soon after the outbreak of war unanimously claimed that Ribbentrop had classified England as weak and incapable of war, someone who "always believed that England would never dare to go to war, no matter what Germany did in the East." A full-page article in the Zurich Weltwoche from
March 15, 1940 contained a complete compilation of inaccurate claims about Ribbentrop's English acquaintances, including Nevile Henderson, who were supposed to have created this false impression, and on this basis he fantasized a short story about the years 1938/39, in which the Austrian and Protectorate crises were presented as a single triumphal march against the English, whom he rightly considered weak, until the establishment of the Protectorate was presented as a single triumphal march against the English, whom he rightly considered weak, until the establishment of the Protectorate was presented as a single triumphal march against the English, whom he rightly considered weak, until the establishment of the Protectorate was presented as a single triumphal march against the English, whom he rightly considered weak Sudeten and Protectorate crises were presented as a single Ribbentrop triumph over the English, whom he rightly classified as weak, until the establishment of the Protectorate woke up the appeasers, who had been so willing until then, and led to a "turnaround" in their

---

[112] PA AA R 27 092/29 429, May 25, 1939; R 27 092/29 468, June 13, 1939; ADAP, D, VI, No. 564 *Dirksen* to AA 24.6.39. *JvR* requested that this report be resubmitted, ditto No. 577; PA AA R 27 118/279 418 August 1, 1939.

[113] Speech of May 23, 1939 (Schmundt Protocol), cf.: *Hofer*, Entfesslung, pp. 104–113.

Politics. [114]The German invasion of Prague was one of those surprising "weekend coups" with which Nazi Germany undermined its credibility as a treaty partner. However, this also proves to be inaccurate in several respects with regard to the British government. Hitler's entry into Prague came as no surprise, nor was it initially regarded in London as a breach of contract.

What is certain is that both the Czech and British governments received early intelligence reports about the planned establishment of the protectorate, partly through intelligence channels.[115] But there were also official signals. On February 20, Ribbentrop himself spoke to Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, head of the economic division of the British Foreign Office, about a political and economic sphere of influence that England should respect. This referred, among other things, to Czechoslovakia, which still existed after the Munich Agreement. A month earlier, Ribbentrop's office had delivered a report from Prague that radically questioned these issues of a sphere of influence. Among others, it was Ribbentrop's sworn enemies from England who were active again in Moravia. On January 25, 1939, the DR reported:

> A new international "mafia" (sic) has formed against the German Reich, mainly with the cooperation of Benesch, in which military circles in particular are involved. At its head is Duff Cooper, the former British Minister of War. Kerillis ([116](Paris?) is also named as a member in Prague. In Poland, two influential figures from the nationalist camp are said to be involved. This new 'mafia' is organizing all of Benesch's people in Czechoslovakia. ...
>
> A redistribution of various territories between England and France would be carried out. ... Poland would be involved in the redistribution. Czechoslovakia would be tasked with stirring up unrest in the minority areas and possibly preparing the ground for action by attempting to incite an uprising. ... The area of Moravian Ostrava is designated as the likely starting point for the attempted uprising."([117])

---

[114]PA AA, R 27157, article by 'K. S.': "Head of the Week – Ribbentrop, the National Socialist who visited the Pope," Weltwoche, March 15, 1940. In the same vein, see also
Weltwoche of December 22, 1939. See PA AA, R 27157, report by the English housekeeper from the *Ribbentrop* household. For this purpose, the London News Review even invented an episode before the outbreak of war, according to which *Ribbentrop* had already declared at a meeting in Ottawa in 1914 that England would never participate in a European war. The same article also claimed that Ambassador *Hoesch* had died of poisoning. PA AA, R 27157, report by the Reich Press Office of the NSDAP dated July 14, 1939, on the article "Without War" in the News Chronicle dated July 6, 1939.

[115] At the beginning of March 1939, the Czech secret service had concrete information about a German invasion on March 15, which was also passed on to the British government. See *Moravec*, Spies, p. 150 f.

[116] Probably *Henri de Kérillis* (1889–1958), French journalist and politician, member of parliament from 1936 to 1942, member of a strongly anti-Nazi parliamentary group led by *Georges Mandel* (1884–1944, murdered).

[117] PA AA R 27091, pp. 29119–29121 Unsigned and uninitialed report dated January 25, 1939.

That was not all. The speeches and reports about the shift in US foreign policy that took place in January had also left their mark on Ribbentrop, as he explained to Ashton-Gwatkin:

> "There were many enemies of Germany – an international gang. Their leaders had now fled from Holland, etc., to the United States, where they were conducting ruthless propaganda against Germany, with President Roosevelt also serving their cause. In Lima, he had just tried to convince the South American states that they would be attacked by Germany. Could anything be more absurd?"[118]

In any case, Ashton-Gwatkin took note of Ribbentrop's announcement regarding Czechoslovakia and inquired with a "German friend" personally instructed by Hitler about the background to this claim. This friend, who was Prince Max von Hohenlohe,[119] informed him that an extension of German rule over Czechoslovakia was imminent, but only there, not over Hungary or Romania. Hitler had explained to him that "the Czechs would retain their nationality, passports, etc., but their foreign policy would be directed by a 'German Resident' in Prague."[120] Ashton-Gwatkin immediately reported this open announcement of the establishment of the protectorate to London one month before it was realized. This is evident from a memorandum from the FO dated March 13, which mentions Ashton-Gwatkin's conversation with Ribbentrop and this information. [121]

This memorandum discussed at length the legal situation, i.e., the question of whether the announced German move to Prague constituted a violation of

---

[118] *Ribbentrop* in conversation with *Ashton Gwatkin*, February 20, 1939, quoted in DBFP, III, 4, Appendix II, p. 602. *Ribbentrop* explicitly referred to the News Chronicle, which he claimed was the preferred outlet for spreading such disinformation in England. He hit the nail on the head, and it was precisely the Berlin News Chronicle correspondent *Ian Colvin* who then, on
On March 30, 1939, he was able to convince the British cabinet that a German attack on Poland was imminent. See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 566, p. 545, note 1. This ultimately triggered the blank check, after *Chamberlain* initially refused to believe this and other fantastic stories, but then the same rumor was circulated in the meeting by the Warsaw embassy. See *Chamberlain,* Diary Letters, p. 400, *Chamberlain* to his sister Hilda, April 1939. A few days later, the News Chronicle published a fictitious story about an exchange of letters between *Chamberlain* and *Mussolini,* which was intended to undermine *Chamberlain's* credibility, as he wrote to his sister *Hilda* in a clearly indignant tone. See *Chamberlain,* Diary Letters, p. 407,
April 15, 1939.

[119] This is evident from a report *by Ashton-Gwatkins* that was not printed in the DBFP. See *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 81. Due to his personal acquaintance with individuals such as *Allen Dulles* and *Winston Churchill*, *Hohenlohe* was later tasked with conducting diplomatic talks on German peace offers after the outbreak of war, which on the British side led to indirect contact with *Ribbentrop's* long-standing liaison *Conwell-Evans*. See *Schlie,* Friede, p. 102 ff.

[120] See DBFP, III, 4, Appendix II, *Ashton Gwatkin's* notes on his stay in Germany, here from February 20, 1939.

[121] See DBFP, III, 4, Doc. 230, p. 238, memorandum by *F. K. Roberts* dated March 13, 1939.

would violate international treaties, in particular the Munich Agreement or the Anglo-German Consultation Treaty, also signed in Munich. The memorandum concluded that this would not be the case. Neither the Munich Agreement nor the Consultation Treaty would be violated by the intended establishment of the protectorate. Moreover, F. K. Roberts expressly stated that there was no "locus standi" whatsoever for the British government to protest against the establishment of the protectorate. Thus, a few days before Czech President Hacha's trip to Berlin, the British government was clear not only about the planned German move, but also about its admissibility under international law, at least with regard to Anglo-German relations. What was presented to the world public as a coup had been announced by Ribbentrop himself and the Foreign Office a month earlier. Accordingly, on March 15, 1939, Prime Minister Chamberlain succinctly declared to the House of Commons that there had been no German aggression, that Czechoslovakia was a victim of "internal disruption" and that, as F. K. Roberts had stated, no international agreement had been violated. However, he added:

> "Even though this was done with the free consent of the Czech government, I cannot accept that the manner in which it was done is in accordance with the spirit of the Munich Agreement."[123]

The history of the protectorate was also determined by the latter. Naturally, Chamberlain's opponents in England seized the opportunity and exploited the questionable nature of the National Socialist grip on the ethnic German borders to achieve their goals. Chamberlain quickly came under pressure and had to explicitly condemn Germany's move within days. It remains interesting to ask why, unlike the numerous false rumors about alleged German attacks on Holland or England or, soon after, on Romania, which filled the world press at the time, this actual planned and announced invasion did not make it into the newspapers. Dietrich Aigner spoke in this context of the "Prague trap" and accused those who otherwise liked to supply the press with information at that time of deliberately remaining silent in the case of Czechoslovakia, thus staging the German "coup" as such for the press.[124] In any case, Ian Colvin, one of those usually responsible for such press reports, admitted that in this case he had deliberately refrained from passing on the information he had to the press. According to his own statements, he had been informed by Under-Secretary Cadogan on March 11 about the imminent German move. Cadogan

---

122 *Bloch*, Das Dritte Reich, p. 254, and *Feiling*, Life, p. 399.
123 Quoted from *Feiling*, Life, p. 400.
124 Cf. *Aigner*, Chaff, N5.

also provided Foreign Minister Halifax and the Prime Minister with the relevant information once again. As was so often the case, Colvin received an identical message at the same time from German government circles critical of the regime, also with the express instruction not to use it publicly so that – according to the German informant's idea – a surprised "Mr. Chamberlain could learn what kind of person Hitler was."[125] There was no official British intervention in response to Ribbentrop's announcements to Ashton-Gwatkin. In the days before the German invasion, there were once again lively debates within the government about possible prior measures, involving Chamberlain, Halifax, Vansittart, Cadogan, Oliver Stanley, and Orme Sargent. They ended with the succinct decision "to do nothing to stop Germany."(126)

The British motives for the gross disproportion between political passivity and legal approval prior to the establishment of the protectorate and its widespread scandalization after the events of March 15 were not uniform. On the one hand, fantastic proposals were submitted, such as that of Ivone Kirkpatrick, then First Secretary of the Central Department, who focused on the symbolic display of British arrogance and wanted to see all personal contacts between German and British military personnel broken off on the grounds of German "unworthiness."[127] On the other hand, the official line was that the march on Prague symbolized Germany's bid for "world domination," despite its own passivity as seen above. This was Nevile Henderson's assessment in his memoirs.(128) Halifax also expressed this view to the German ambassador on the day of the invasion.(129) Finally on March 20, none other than Prime Minister Chamberlain spoke to the cabinet about a possible attack on Germany, citing this very reason:

> "If Germany shows signs of continuing its march toward world domination, then we must take the necessary steps to stop it with a two-front attack. We will not attack Germany to save a particular victim, but to strike down the tyrant."(130)

With this, he had formulated what was to happen later. British policy—it is not entirely clear to what extent Chamberlain was involved—made a shift against Germany and, months later, declared war on two fronts, not to save its alleged victim Poland, but to destroy the "tyrant" despite his attempts at appeasement. Chamberlain's role is not entirely clear in this regard, as he repeatedly complained about pressure from domestic politics

---

125 See *Cadogan*, Diaries, p. 155, March 11, 1939, and *Colvin*, Vansittart, p. 290 f.
126 See *Cadogan*, Diaries, p. 156, March 14, 1939.
127 See *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 106.
128 See *Henderson*, Failure, p. 250.
129 Cf. DBFP, III, vol. 7, pp. 270–272.
130 *Chamberlain* on March 20, 1939, Cab Minutes 20 Mar. 1939 CAB 23/98, quoted here from *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 124.

and overseas, which would force him into conflict with Germany. A few weeks after the above-quoted announcement of the attack, he wrote to one of his sisters that people like Churchill, who wanted war as soon as possible, must be resisted to the last.[131]However, it is not clear whether this annoyance was really an expression of his fundamental aversion to war or rather an expression of his fears that Churchill's overly public belligerence could damage the politically desirable impression that this was a British defensive war rather than an offensive one.

As we have seen, Ribbentrop noted in his final report as ambassador that British policy would ultimately not yield to arguments such as national self-determination. Under the guise of rhetoric of this kind, London itself had always created very different realities and ultimately a global empire. In the context of the Prague affairs of 1939, this observation was certainly true of the internal British debates. Alexander Cadogan, the head of the Foreign Office, expressed this best in a humorous diary entry on March 20:

> "I have always said that as long as Hitler can pretend that he is only bringing Germans back into the Reich, we can pretend that he has a right to do so. When he begins to devour other nations, the time will have come to say 'Stop!'"[132]

In this worldview, "principles" such as national self-determination or contractually guaranteed international law were only one element of the current linguistic usage. They had no real substance, as Ribbentrop had seen. From this perspective, Germany's move into Prague showed that an opponent had been found who could now be fought with new slogans such as "striving for world domination" and "lack of credibility," with little risk that Britain's actual world domination and the repeatedly broken credibility of British politics would become an issue in return. Ribbentrop and the Foreign Office made numerous unsuccessful attempts to raise this issue between 1939 and 1941.

However, it was only the story[of] an allegedly imminent German invasion of Romania[133]– once again fabricated, as in May 1938 in the case of Czechoslovakia, and this time pushed into the print media by all means possible – that created the

---

131 Cf. *Chamberlain*, Diary Letters, p. 403, *Chamberlain* to his sister *Ida*, April 9, 1939.

132 Quoted in *Cadogan*, Diaries, p. 161, March 20, 1939.

133 This was achieved by the "Tilea Affair" a few days after the events in Prague. On March 17, 1939, Romanian Ambassador *Virgil Tilea* appeared at the British Foreign Office and informed Minister *Halifax* that the German government had issued an ultimatum to Romania to place itself in economic dependence on Germany. This led to a huge press response and contributed to the aforementioned guarantees from Great Britain and France. *Robert Boothby*, a member of Churchill's Focus network, later took responsibility for this operation. See *Scheil,* Gegner, Chapter VII, D.

This was a prerequisite for the British government to secure a contractual option to be able to open a war against Germany as a two-front war at any time. In the second half of March 1939, the London government "guaranteed" Poland and Romania, accompanied by false rumors of German attacks. However, it also bound Poland to its side in the event of an offensive war – and vice versa. The main purpose of this undertaking was to successfully wage a possible war against Germany, for which Poland was needed and, if necessary, would be brought into position by a unilateral declaration, as Foreign Minister Halifax explained to his French counterpart Bonnet the day after Chamberlain's threat of attack.

If there had ultimately been a political "Prague trap," then Hitler had set it himself with his loud announcements the previous year that he wanted "no Czechs at all." Admittedly, the invasion of Prague was in line with the program of the Hoßbach Conference and remained within the historical borders of the German Reich and Confederation; admittedly, for informed government circles in England, it was not a "coup," but had been announced and, moreover, had apparently been carried out in accordance with international law. But it certainly did not correspond to what had been publicly proclaimed as German objectives in previous years. Germany had waged the Cold War with secret rearmament and, since 1935, with the public proclamation of military supremacy under the slogan "Liberation of the Germans from Versailles." The protectorate, on the other hand, could be regarded as the first "subjugation of other peoples."([135]) It also invalidated any ethnic arguments regarding the points of contention with the Republic of Poland, such as in Danzig and the current Polish territory in West Prussia, the much-invoked "corridor." This became a constant topic of discussion during the negotiations in the weeks that followed. If the German government argued "historically" to justify the invasion of Prague, it could not refuse the Polish side to do the same in the case of Danzig. On the other hand, rule over Bohemia and Moravia meant ultimate control over Central Europe for Nazi Germany. As long as the regime remained internally stable, it could now only be overthrown by a major European war. This war would in all likelihood spell the end of the Greater German nation state, but it would also have catastrophic consequences for all other parties involved. Ribbentrop had still not been able to win any allies, but his deterrence strategy against Great Britain could now be based on considerably expanded substance.

---

[134] See DBFP, IV, Doc. 458, p. 427, and *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 135 f.

[135] As *Stalin* recalled in his speech to young Soviet officers on May 5, 1941. See *Ueberschär*, Angriff, p. 184.

4. Program fulfilled: Greater German nation-state for one year

> "The German people have survived all wars and all setbacks. They survived the Roman era, they survived the early and late Middle Ages, they even survived the Thirty Years' War, they survived the Napoleonic Wars and the World War, and," the Führer added humorously, "they will survive me too."
>
> Report from Ribbentrop's office from November 1938[136]

There was a time when today's past lay in the future. For historians, this means it is necessary to put themselves in a past situation as if it were an open situation at the time and to avoid, as far as possible, interpreting the course of events as inevitable based on later developments. The majority opinion of contemporary history does not escape this danger and amounts to wanting to see a determined course of German policy in the months following the Munich Agreement. It is said to have led beyond the Munich Agreement to the complete integration of Bohemia and Moravia, at the same time to the conclusion of a German-Polish agreement that was to make Poland a German satellite, and finally to a major war, although opinions are divided as to whether this was to be a major war in the West or a war in the East, or both in the form of a phased program. There is no evidence for any of this.

With the conclusion of the Munich Agreement, significant parts of the program outlined in the Hossbach Memorandum had been fulfilled by the fall of 1938, certainly more quickly than Ribbentrop or Hitler could have imagined when the change in the Foreign Ministry took place in the spring. Austria and Czechoslovakia could be considered problems that, from the German point of view, had seemed unsolvable until 1938. With a mixture of surprise and threats of war, accelerated in each case by half-hearted provocations from the respective rulers in Vienna and Prague as well as from some circles in the Western powers and the USSR, eight months after Joachim von Ribbentrop took office had been enough to achieve decisive successes in both cases. The "ten million Germans beyond the border" proclaimed by Hitler in his speech in February 1938, whose interests the German Reich now wanted to represent, now lived predominantly within the borders of that Reich. The two issues that Ribbentrop had mentioned when he took office remained to be resolved: Memel and Danzig. Both were considered secondary for good reasons, but both affected German-Polish relations, which remained fundamentally unresolved despite all the publicly demonstrated identity of interests.

---

[136] Quoted from PA AA R 27091, p. 29045, report by the DR, signed by *Likus*.

As he had already stated in the Hoßbach meeting, Hitler hoped that Poland would be more favorable toward Germany after the destruction of Czechoslovakia and the annexation of Austria. With every setback in these matters, he had previously expected Poland to take action against Germany, and he was obviously right. Now, for him and for Ribbentrop, the Republic of Poland represented the keystone that still had to be put in place under the new circumstances. After the Munich Agreement, Ribbentrop formally showered Germany's neighbors with a wave of border recognition and non-aggression pacts. Among other things, he traveled to Paris once again in December 1938 for this purpose. This meant that not only the Weimar Republic, which had been virtually blackmailed at Versailles, but also Nazi-ruled Germany had declared its final renunciation of Alsace-Lorraine, "voluntarily and without it costing us anything," as France's minister responsible, Bonnet, writes in his memoirs.[137] Opinions differed somewhat on the last point, because Ribbentrop was of the opinion that he had gained something: a fundamental French renunciation of its previous anti-German alliance policy with the "cordon sanitaire" states of Central Europe. There were no written agreements on this, but Bonnet had apparently made corresponding remarks.

This favored a plan that Ribbentrop had been pursuing for several weeks, since October 1938 to be precise. The Republic of Poland was also to be spared from any German claims for revision. As with Italy in the case of South Tyrol and France in the case of Alsace, this meant that Germany would finally renounce West Prussia, which had been the subject of constant German claims since the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 as the "Polish Corridor." During the Weimar period, the Foreign Office had refused to recognize this border demarcation, and even now, at the turn of 1938/39, State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker recommended the immediate recovery of the corridor and the reduction of Poland to a "buffer state," if his notes are to be believed.[138] That was not the goal of Ribbentrop's policy, which he pursued at that time with Hitler's backing. However, he was of the opinion that, in the case of Poland as in the case of Italy, the renunciation of up to

---

[137] Quoted from *Bonnet*, Katastrophe, p. 137. During the negotiations, *Ribbentrop* justified this step less on friendly grounds than on pragmatic ones: "If, after a successful war, we were to take Alsace-Lorraine back from you, this land would one day become the cause of a new war between France and Germany." (Ibid., p. 136). In fact, whether based on such considerations or not, the Nazi government felt bound by the agreements reached even after the next "successful" conflict. The German-French armistice agreement of June 22, 1940, made no mention of Alsace-Lorraine and left French territory undivided under international law. See the text of the agreement in: *Hohlfeld,* Dokumente, vol. V, pp. 193–199.

[138] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78787, *Schliep's* notes, December 30, 1938. On *Weizsäcker's* recommendation, see *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 150.

claims made at that time could in fact demand something tangible: the Free City of Danzig.

Furthermore, Poland should be won over as a member of the Anti-Comintern Pact. If a formal alliance were to be formed, an allied Poland, together with Germany (and Hungary), would indeed represent a bloc that would be impossible to overrun quickly and would have brought Hitler's "Greater German Reich" concept, formulated in his "Second Book" in 1928, much closer to realization. On October 24, 1938, a most courteously worded offer was therefore made to the Polish government to place German-Polish relations on a new footing. It contained eight points:([139])

- Incorporation of Danzig into the German Reich
- Establishment of an extraterritorial road and rail link between Germany and East Prussia
- Establishment of a similar connection and a free port for Poland in the Danzig area
- German sales guarantee for Polish goods in the Gdańsk area
- The two nations recognize their common borders (guarantee) or mutual territories
- The German-Polish Treaty of 1934 is extended for 25 years
- Poland joins the Anti-Comintern Pact
- The two states add a consultation clause to their treaty

These points were presented to Ambassador Josef Lipski by Ribbentrop and later handed over in writing together with the transcript of the conversation. The last statement is important because this is precisely what the Polish government steadfastly denied to all Western countries in the months that followed, even after Great Britain had already given its guarantee. Josef Beck told Neville Chamberlain on April 4, 1939, that no written German demands, such as for a road to East Prussia, had ever been handed over. He could imagine that Mr. von Ribbentrop might have such ideas, but certainly not without the approval of his boss, he assured him innocently.Such forms of disinformation were part and parcel of political debate, but Beck used them to such an unusual extent that in the end no one wanted to work with him anymore.

---

[139] Quoted from ADAP, Series D, Vol. 5, Doc. 81, p. 87 f., original in PA AA R 28881, p. 78675 ff., here p. 78677 f.

[140] Cf. BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, Doc. 94, p. 81, record of the conversation between *Beck*, *Raczynski*, and *Joseph Potocki* on the Polish side and *Chamberlain*, *Halifax*, *Cadogan*, and *Strang* on the British side.

Back in October 1938, Lipski had indeed requested a meeting with JvR in order to prepare for the visit of his minister Beck and to propose a German declaration on maintaining the territorial status quo in Danzig and the Corridor. The Polish government saw itself in the role of creditor because of its good cooperation with the Reich in the partition of Czechoslovakia. After all, both sides had already agreed on their mutual interests on September 28, 1938, i.e., before the Munich Agreement was concluded, and had even demarcated their respective spheres of interest in Czechoslovakia. Poland had thus, from its point of view, covered Germany's back—on September 20, Lipski had presented Hitler with a whole list of Polish achievements—and had put its "goodwill" on record for this time. But what Hitler saw as the first stage of a longer-term cooperation had been only an extremely limited deal for the Polish government, which now wanted to collect its profits.

Lipski immediately responded to Ribbentrop's proposals by issuing a lengthy statement, probably prepared for entirely different purposes, on the symbolic role of Danzig for Poland. Poland recognized the German character of Danzig, did not interfere in the internal affairs of the city, but rejected its annexation to the Reich, which was also hardly enforceable in terms of domestic policy. A "closer study" of the issue would certainly eliminate "any points of friction." ([142])Ribbentrop, for his part, tried to dissuade Lipski from making a quick decision, but hinted that domestic political difficulties were also to be expected in Germany if the Polish border were recognized. Against this background, the reincorporation of Danzig was the necessary compensation for Germany's renunciation of the corridor.

In the midst of these initial negotiations, the pogroms of November 9–10, 1938, broke out, soon becoming known by the ironic term "Reichskristallnacht" (Reich Crystal Night), which caricatured the regime. They were also a disaster for Ribbentrop's policies. The development came as a complete surprise, given that just a few weeks earlier, the Munich Agreement had almost completely implemented Germany's program of revision, and the attempts immediately thereafter to resolve the still potential conflict with Poland did not appear hopeless, at least in the initial stages. Recent research regularly holds propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels responsible for the concrete incitement and nationwide organization of the riots. In any case, it was Goebbels who, the day after, tried to justify the unjustifiable to the international press. Clearly impressed by the complete rejection and disgusted silence of the journalists present, he finally broke off the press conference and quickly left the room with his staff without answering questions as promised.

---

[141] *Wojciechowski*, On the Threshold of War, p. 271, and *Pagel*, Poland, p. 146.

[142] ADAP, Series D, Vol. 5, Doc. 81, p. 88.

Ribbentrop's office prepared a report on Goebbels' failed attempt to justify Kristallnacht and tried to find something positive to say to the foreign minister:

> In the same context, reference is made to the speech given by the Reich Foreign Minister just four days ago at the banquet for the foreign press at the Hotel Esplanade, the favorable impression of which is still being mentioned by foreign press representatives. They compared the appearances of the two ministers and concluded that the Reich Foreign Minister's absence from the anti-Jewish demonstrations spoke only in his favor. The wording of his telegrams sent in the von Rath murder case was also generally regarded as moderate."([143])

The incompatibility of such brutal riots with the state's desired self-image was clearly addressed here. Behind the riots of November 9, 1938, there was also a current German-Polish conflict. Its immediate history began with the Polish government's attempt to revoke the passports of its citizens of Jewish origin living in Germany and to make them stateless in Germany. After the failure of diplomatic intervention, these people – including the parents of Rath's assassin Grynszpan – were deported by the German authorities to the German-Polish border. There they were stuck in no man's land, as the Polish authorities would not let them into the country. The parents of Herschel Grynszpan were also affected by this refugee misery in the German-Polish no man's land. Out of despair, Grynszpan murdered the German chargé d'affaires in Paris a few days later, thus providing the pretext for Kristallnacht.[144] The Polish government, for its part, countered the German measures by expelling Germans living in Poland, which is why the German deportation campaign was very quickly halted. [145] No one was sitting in cattle cars yet. [146] But these transports of unpopular people,

---

([143]) PAAA R 27091, p. 29049 f., confidential report by the DR dated November 11, 1938. Detailed report on the impact of the speech of November 7, 1938, by the DR on November 8, 1938: *Ribbentrop* had softened and explained *Hitler's* previous polemic, demonstrating statesmanship. "After the Reich Foreign Minister had left the hall, the foreigners expressed their hope that, following the Führer's speech, which they now understood, the Axis powers would establish good relations with the Western powers." See R 27090, p. 28838, report by the DR dated November 8, 1938.

[144] Cf. ADAP, D, V, Doc. 107, p. 115.

[145] Quoted from ADAP, D, V, Doc. 92, p. 100, memo *from Woermann*, conversation with Polish chargé d'affaires *Scheliha*. It was agreed that the Jews waiting at the border would be allowed to enter Poland, but that in future only about one hundred per month would be allowed to follow. On February 3, 1939, *Himmler* then reported that approximately 7,000–8,000 Polish Jews would remain in Germany, whose citizenship would be revoked by the Warsaw government before their departure. See ADAP, D, V, Doc. 127, p. 141.

[146] As *Marcel Reich-Ranicki,* who was also deported from Germany to Poland at the time, emphasizes in his autobiography.

who could no longer be blamed for anything more than their mere existence, already gave a glimpse of the potential for violence that was still being concealed by international diplomacy.

The pogroms of November 9, 1938, were a political disaster for Ribbentrop's policies, but did not immediately lead to a political reaction. The way in which anti-Semitism was on the international agenda at that time, and therefore even the crude anti-Semitic actions of the Polish or German governments did not influence the course of events elsewhere, became clear once again during Ribbentrop's state visit to Paris after the Munich Agreement. There, as mentioned above, Ribbentrop once again recognized the existing German-French borders in a treaty, i.e., the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the Treaty of Versailles. This break with the customs of Weimar foreign policy, which was not to confirm any decision made at Versailles elsewhere, was welcomed in Paris. The events of Kristallnacht did not change this, quite the contrary. When the official talks were over, Bonnet raised another issue, as can be seen from Ribbentrop's notes presented to Hitler:

> "The Jewish question. After I explained to Mr. Bonnet that I could not discuss this issue with him officially, he said he wanted to tell me privately how interested France was in finding a solution to the Jewish problem. When I asked what interest France had in this, Mr. Bonnet said, first, that they no longer wanted to accept Jews from Germany and asked whether we could take any measures to prevent them from coming to France, and second, that France needed to get rid of ten thousand Jews. The main idea here was Madagascar.
>
> I replied to Mr. Bonnet that we wanted to get rid of all our Jews, but that the difficulty lay in the fact that no country wanted to take them in and, furthermore, in the lack of foreign currency. While I had always refused, and still refused today, to discuss this issue with any foreign committee, I would like to inform him confidentially that I had agreed that a German who was well versed in Jewish issuesproblem to meet with a representative of an international committee in a private capacity to examine the practical aspects of the question of Jewish emigration from Germany. I believed that this meeting was taking place in Switzerland at this very moment.[147] I also told the French foreign minister that Jewish settlement was particularly difficult because Jews did not want to do farm work, and even if the most beautiful settlement project were to be carried out today, I feared that within a short time the Jews would sell everything again and return to the capital of the country in question to engage in trade." (148)

---

[147] A subcommittee of the "Intergovernmental Committee on the Problem of German Refugees" met in London on December 2, 1938. With his reference to Switzerland, *Ribbentrop* was probably referring to the Evian Conference, which had taken place in Evian, Switzerland, in the summer and was followed by various follow-up conferences.

[148] *Ribbentrop's* notes of December 9, 1938, quoted here from ADAP, D, IV, p. 420 f.

In this case, too, it was not Minister Ribbentrop who brought up the subject. He wanted to avoid it at all costs, but then revealed his adherence to the anti-Jewish clichés of the time with his remark about the lack of Jewish enthusiasm for agricultural work, clichés that had become obsolete, at the latest, with the ongoing settlement construction in Palestine. Bonnet, for his part, acted on his own initiative, which is remarkable inasmuch as the conversation took place just a few weeks after Kristallnacht, which had severely strained Germany's relations with Western countries. The only Western country that did not officially react was France. Although it had been generally expected in diplomatic circles that Ribbentrop's planned trip and the joint German-French government declaration would be postponed as a result of November 9, 1938, no such step was taken in Paris. The government there apparently interpreted Kristallnacht as an exacerbation of an international problem and, if it considered any measures in this area at all, then rather those currently in place in Germany.[149] At the suggestion of the French minister, Ribbentrop now signaled his agreement that there was a Jewish problem and described its – allegedly – special characteristics, but then referred the matter to a commission – and, by way of this record, to Hitler. [150]

Word spread among diplomatic circles in Berlin that German-Polish talks had not progressed much under these circumstances. On November 30, Ribbentrop received a transcript of a conversation between Ernst Woermann, head of the Political Department of the Foreign Office, and the Estonian envoy, according to which there was widespread talk in the diplomatic corps of a deterioration in German-Polish relations, particularly in view of the new Polish-Soviet declaration.[151] The Polish Foreign Ministry had not been idle in the meantime and had extended the non-aggression pact concluded with the USSR in 1932 in this joint declaration. Ribbentrop responded on December 2 with a gentle reminder to Lipski that they had been "surprised" by this declaration. Poland had not given any prior notice, "which was not entirely in keeping with friendly relations." He thus practically confirmed the rumors that were circulating,([152]) but did not raise any objection to the matter itself. One day later, a report on a visit to Bucharest by a director of the Kaolin Works,[Mr.] Meuser, was in the RAM office, according to which "the Polish Foreign Minister Beck is said to have declared during his visit to Bucharest that Poland would now definitely abandon its pro-German policy."

---

[149] *Saul Friedländer* also comes to this conclusion, citing further statements and considerations by French politicians on this point. See *Friedländer*, Persecution, p. 324.

[150] The document bears *Ribbentrop's* handwritten note "Führer" in the header.

[151] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78756, *Woermann's* notes from November 30, 1938.

[152] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78758, *Ribbentrop's* notes from December 2, 1938.

[153] Cannot be determined with certainty.

will be."[154] Ribbentrop apparently did not have this message, but he did have one from the next day with all kinds of friendly greetings from Beck and accompanying congratulations on the Franco-German declaration just concluded in Paris. [155]

On December 15, after returning from Paris, Ribbentrop spoke once again with Lipski, who conveyed the invitation to Poland. He did not disagree with Ribbentrop's response that such a trip would only make sense if it were connected to the "envisaged 'grand solution'," but showed complete understanding, although he did not comment on the point raised by Ribbentrop regarding Danzig and indicated a "negative attitude."[156] In a reply to Moltke, Germany's diplomatic representative in Warsaw, on December 20, Beck stated that he intended to spend the holidays in Monte Carlo and would be available for a "general discussion" on his return journey.[157]Ten days later, Ernst von Weizsäcker received word from an unnamed but "absolutely reliable leader of the German ethnic group in Poland" that Beck allegedly wanted to declare his willingness to enter into an anti-Soviet alliance during the conversation he had initiated, provided that Polish Ukraine and the German-Polish borders were guaranteed. In return, Poland would offer concessions in the form of disinterest in Memel and "if necessary, even" the "pure reintegration of Danzig." The report warned against accepting such an offer and demanded "at least a solution to the corridor question in Germany's favor." This could be the reason for Ernst von Weizsäcker's remarks that he had recommended to Ribbentrop at the turn of 1938/39 that Poland be reduced to buffer status and that the corridor be acquired immediately.[158] In any case, it showed the pressure of rumors about possible variants, concessions, and changes in alliances under which politicians on all sides conducted their talks.

No decision was made on this issue. Josef Beck's talks with Hitler and Ribbentrop in Berchtesgaden in early January and Ribbentrop's return visit to Warsaw at the end of January 1939 took place without any such offers being made by the Polish side. Beck agreed only vaguely and noncommittally to the two Germans' statements about a settlement and possible cooperation, even when Ribbentrop actually held out the prospect of recognizing Poland's exclusive relationship with Ukraine. When the British Embassy in Warsaw asked Beck a few days later for more details about the content of the talks with Ribbentrop, Beck largely evaded the question, but stated clearly

---

[154] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78760, *Keppler's* notes, December 4, 1938.
[155] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78761, *Woermann's* notes, December 5, 1938.
[156] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78776 ff., December 15, 1938.
[157] See PA AA R 28881, p. 78780 ff., message from *Moltke*, December 20, 1938.
[158] Cf. PA AA R 28881, p. 78787, *Schliep's* notes, December 30, 1938. On *Weizsäcker's* recommendation, cf. *Hill*, Papers, II, p. 150.

not to join the Anti-Comintern Pact.[159] This was good news for London. From the Polish point of view, Ribbentrop's anti-British construct lacked appeal. The Polish-British contacts, which had since developed further, and possibly also a shift in French policy, which moved away from the restraint towards Ribbentrop expressed in December in Eastern Central Europe,[160] certainly played a role in this. At the beginning of 1939, the Polish ambassador to Washington, Potocki, also sent home the reports that later became so notorious, according to which Jewry in the US had long since decided on war against Germany and would carry it through:

> In conversations with Jewish representatives of the press, I repeatedly encountered the relentless and resolutely held view that war is inevitable. In its propaganda, this international Jewry uses every means at its disposal, exploiting everything that runs counter to any tendency toward consolidation and understanding between states. In this way, the conviction is growing steadily but surely among the public here that the Germans and their satellites in the form of fascism are enemies that the 'democratic world' must defeat."([161]

In view of this and previous reports, Poland's Foreign Minister Beck was unlikely to be inclined to move closer to Germany politically and thus risk being labeled a "satellite." The lines of conflict therefore solidified despite Ribbentrop's activities. This was not always immediately apparent from the outside. His trip to Warsaw in January, for example, "unfortunately led a not inconsiderable part of Western opinion at the time to fear that an agreement on Danzig and the corridor problem might still be reached," League of Nations Commissioner Burckhardt later noted.[162]Diplomatic pressure from the West and the prospect of rewards for a new Polish course against Germany were the double burden for such an agreement. Ultimately, however, Poland's claim to unhindered access to the Baltic Sea was firmly entrenched in Polish foreign policy and national consciousness. The idea that Poland would voluntarily cede the Vistula and Memel estuaries to Germany could only be a rumor.

The final alignment of Polish politics with the West became apparent early on. On March 25, 1939, Ribbentrop's office finally received a report from a Swiss source at the Polish embassy stating that the mood there was poor and negative. There was talk of the previous equality

---

[159] See BDFA, II, F. Vol. 58, Doc. 7, report by Ambassador *Kennard* to *John Simon* dated January 11, 1939.

[160] At least, that was *Paul Schmidt*'s assumption in his notes on *Ribbentrop's* stay in Warsaw (copy in the author's possession).

[161] Quoted from AA, Roosevelt's Way, p. 40, *Potocki's* report of February 9, 1938. Quotation marks in the original.

[162] Quoted from *Burckhardt*, Mission, p. 326.

to abandon its policy of neutrality altogether and, on Beck's upcoming trip to London, to enter into an alliance with the West, primarily under pressure from the Polish army, but only if "very specific and firm guarantees could be obtained from England and France. Apparently, guarantees of a military nature are being considered."([163] Apparently, however, these guarantees also included material acquisitions. This is what Heinrich Brüning, the former German Reich Chancellor, who spent the years 1938/39 in British-American exile and witnessed the British-Polish contacts, believed he had learned. He had finally broken off his own contact with Winston Churchill in the spring of 1939 because "from his speeches and from everything I had heard after my return, I realized that I could not prevent the Admiralty and the group around Churchill from advocating war at any price."([164]This was obviously also related to information about British "guarantees" that he received at that time, which casts the English "blank check" for a Polish attack on Germany in a new light. It was not until the end of the war that Brüning revealed this in several private letters, for example in a letter to Jakob Goldschmidt dated March 7, 1945:

> "In addition, before the outbreak of war, I learned of an agreement between the British and Polish governments on the separation of East Prussia and other parts of East Germany; and I made it absolutely clear that this would preclude any action on my part and that I would not be prepared to sign any peace treaty on these terms."[165]

In the same vein, he later wrote resignedly to Arnold Brecht:

> "Do you believe that any of us could have changed anything after the summer of 1940 about the fact that Poland had risked war because of the promise made by the British government in the spring of 1939 to retain not only East Prussia but also Upper Silesia?" [166]

Whether Neville Chamberlain himself signed such an agreement, or whether the government circles referred to by Brüning were Churchill

---

[163] Cf. PA AA R 27902, p. 29285, unsigned report dated March 25, 1939.

[164] *Brüning's* note on 'Impressions in England', March 1939, quoted in *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 233. At the time, German Ambassador *Dirksen's* personal assessment of the political situation in London was similar. He noted a population that really just wanted an end to the constant turmoil, a group around *Chamberlain that* was willing to compromise, surrounded "by a broader layer of determined and war-mongering enemies of Germany, consisting of the circle around *Churchill-Eden-Amery-Cooper* with their followers, left-wing liberals, ultra-pacifist elements, the newspaper group around the Daily Chronicle, Yorkshire Post, Manchester Guardian, influential Jewish groups, emigrants, American influences, etc." Quoted from Documents and Materials, p. 185, *Dirksen's* note from September 1939.

[165] *Brüning* to *Goldschmidt*, March 7, 1945, private collection *of Nix*, cited here from *Volkmann*, Brüning,
p. 339.

[166] HUG FP 93.10, Box 4, File: *Arnold*, Clara Brecht. *Brüning* to *A. Brecht*, September 2, 1946, p. 1, cited here from *Volkmann*, Brüning, p. 339.

and the Admiralty, whom he accused of wanting war at any price, cannot be determined at this point. The first possibility in particular seems highly unlikely. In fact, such rumors may have been spread in order to exploit the fears of division that were present within the political leadership in Germany itself. ([167] The fact that the Polish government actively sought war in 1939 and hoped to gain land and rights in eastern Germany as a result is confirmed by statements made by Polish politicians, the close cooperation between the London ambassador Raczynski and the Churchill group, the rejection of the repeatedly offered negotiations on the basis of a German guarantee of the existing borders, and the corresponding propaganda in Poland itself. Likewise, the British side considered a Polish-British secret agreement from the outset when Josef Beck began planning his trip to London in the spring of 1939. The British representative in Warsaw, Ambassador Kennard, even considered the non-publication of any agreements to be a prerequisite for them:

> "Poland would most certainly prefer to strengthen its existing treaties with France, Romania, or even the USSR rather than provoke Germany by signing and *publishing* a new alliance directed against it"[168]

This underestimated Poland's determination to wage war against Germany as early as March, when several hundred thousand men had been mobilized. [169]However, it coincided with Josef Beck's later statement in London that "there is a significant difference between what can be said publicly and the real intentions of the Polish government."[170] Ultimately, the negotiations resulted in both a publicly provocative British-Polish offensive alliance and a secret agreement, published only in 1945, which designated Germany as the sole enemy of this alliance. A second secret agreement, which set the price for this alliance in the form of German territory, would have been obvious. Beck wanted to in London

---

[167] *Hitler* told Hungarian Foreign Minister *Csaky* on August 8, 1939, that the current Polish plans to divide Germany should be regarded "only as an expression of pathological degeneration of reason." According to *Hitler*, the Western powers were also planning a new and enlarged Czechoslovakia for the post-war period, which would include, among other things, "Upper Austria, the Regensburg area, and parts of Silesia." See ADAP, D, VI, Doc. 784, p. 918. *Csaky* replied that *Vansittart* had informed him four days earlier that Hungary would share Germany's fate if necessary.

[168] See BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, Doc. 7, report from Ambassador *Kennard* to *Halifax* dated March 21, 1939.

[169] "Please believe me that the mobilization was not just a demonstration. We were ready for war at that time, if it had been necessary." *Marshal Rydz-Śmigly* in an interview with the News Chronicle on July 19, 1939, quoted in AA, Vorgeschichte, p. 400.

[170] Cf. BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, Doc. 94, p. 84, *Beck* in conversation with Prime Minister *Chamberlain* on April 4, 1939.

Make demands regarding "colonies, Jews, and Danzig." Halifax had already rejected the first two topics in advance, especially the colonial question, which prompted Beck to ask in astonishment what they wanted to talk about at all.[173] Of course, the official records provide only limited information about what was ultimately discussed. Edward Raczynski, who was responsible for representing the Republic of Poland in London, certainly had good reason to be relieved when the first German white paper containing "Polish documents on the history leading up to the war" was published in 1940. The documents were undoubtedly genuine, and he had read them "with some trepidation, but they contained nothing that could compromise me or the embassy," he noted in his diary. Operation Künsberg, with which the Foreign Office investigated matters in Warsaw and elsewhere, had only been able to secure a fraction of the documents on Polish foreign policy. However, they provided remarkable evidence that American government representatives had made it abundantly clear to their Polish colleagues that they were on a war footing against Germany, even to the point of entering the war themselves.

Just how embarrassing it was for the Polish negotiators to find a reason to reject Ribbentrop's proposals can also be seen from the fact that the existence of these proposals and their content were flatly denied by the Warsaw Foreign Ministry when Hitler made them public in April 1939:

> "The Foreign Office claims that, contrary to the Reich Chancellor's statements, the German government did not propose to Poland either an extension of the non-aggression pact or a guarantee of Slovak independence by Germany, Poland, and Hungary."

Leon Noël reported this falsehood from Warsaw on April 29, 1939. At that time, French diplomats in the German and Polish capitals were told so many things that were untrue, came from dubious sources, and yet still appeared in reports sent to Paris. The reports from Noël's Berlin colleague Coulondre are full of references to conversations with Mr. "X" and information from an unnamed "reliable source" in the German Foreign Ministry. Both ambassadors were grateful recipients of such rumors; Noël in particular reproduced the Polish information uncritically in long memoranda to his own foreign minister.

---

[171] See DBFP, III. Series, Vol. IV, Doc. 175, p. 181, March 4, 1939, telegram from *Kennard* to *Halifax*.

[172] Quoted in DBFP, III. Series, Vol. IV, Doc. 189, p. 205, March 8, 1939. *Halifax* to *Kennard*.

[173] Cf. BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, Doc. 7, report from Ambassador *Kennard* to *Halifax* dated March 10, 1939.

[174] Quoted from *Raczynski*, London, p. 51, entry dated June 20, 1940.

[175] Quoted in Gelbbuch, Doc. 111, p. 144, *Noël's* report to *Bonnet* from Warsaw on April 29, 1939.

But Coulondre also relied heavily on information that he must have received primarily from Ernst von Weizsäcker and that was demonstrably inaccurate, especially with regard to the assessment of the German foreign minister's mood and intentions. Even when the information was accurate, Coulondre regularly proved incapable of correctly assessing the underlying motives of Ribbentrop's foreign policy, i.e., the threat to Germany he perceived from policies emanating from England. Typical is the summary of Ribbentrop's presumed policy based on information also "obtained covertly" in June 1939:

> Before Mr. von Ribbentrop finally decides on a particular course of action, he is waiting for the outcome of the talks between the Western powers and Russia. As far as he is concerned, the entire Polish question is at stake. This problem could be solved as follows:
>
> Either through an agreement with England and France, as was the case with Czechoslovakia.
>
> Or through an agreement with Poland itself. Or through an
>
> agreement with Russia.
>
> The first solution is ruled out by the stance taken by Paris and London since March 15.
>
> The second solution is hampered by Polish intransigence, reinforced by the British guarantee; there is therefore little hope that it will be realized. ...
>
> So that leaves the third solution, namely the destruction of the Polish state through a partition between the Reich and Russia. Mr. von Ribbentrop has still not abandoned this idea."[176]

According to Coulondre, these statements were conveyed to him "by a figure from Mr. von Ribbentrop's immediate circle" in the German Foreign Ministry. He assumed that this had been done without Ribbentrop's knowledge and therefore suspected treachery. It is impossible to say whether the influence of Ernst von Weizsäcker and his colleagues can be recognized here as well. ([177])There was a certain contradiction between the two pieces of information: Ribbentrop continued to consider a German-Polish understanding possible and desirable, but at the same time sought the formal "destruction" of the Polish state through its partition. Coulondre took this as proof of the authenticity of the information, which could only have the effect of prompting the Western powers to "accelerate the negotiations (with Moscow, author's note), the conclusion of which is obviously feared in Berlin." ([178]) At least in this case, the information was correct.

---

[176] Quoted from Gelbbuch, Doc. 135, p. 190, report *from Coulondres* to *Bonnet* from Berlin dated June 13, 1939.

[177] *Coulondre* explicitly refers to the "State Secretary" as the source of his information in many places. See, for example, Yellow Book, Doc. 148, p. 208, and Yellow Book, Doc. 145, p. 203.

[178] Quoted from Yellow Book, Doc. 135, p. 191, comment *by Coulondre* to *Bonnet* on the authenticity of the information.

This was a reflection of the current trend in German politics in August 1939 to be open to agreements and alliances in all directions, as long as a major military conflict could be avoided. In fact, Ribbentrop sought to force both the Western powers and Poland into a conference and a joint guarantee of the conference outcome with regard to Poland through an understanding with Russia, while at the same time achieving a demarcation of German-Soviet intentions in other Eastern European issues. This did not have to result in a small or large war or in the partition of Poland, but was intended to permanently secure the German position in Central Europe achieved in 1938/39 against attacks. Based on this realization, the Western powers' negotiations with Moscow could have resulted in either a real acceleration or a substantial deepening of the process. In Moscow, the Western powers negotiated an alliance against Germany, including far-reaching political and military issues in the Baltic region that directly affected German interests. If peace and the preservation of the territorial status quo of the Republic of Poland were to be the primary and lasting goals of the Western powers, the political inclusion of Germany in the talks would actually have been appropriate at a certain point. But let us first turn to the specific circumstances of the British guarantee to Poland.

5. The failure of deterrence

> "I know that there are a lot of reckless people who want to plunge us into war right now, but we must resist them until it is truly unavoidable."
>
> Neville Chamberlain[179]

> "All enemies are a joke, because Śmigly-Rydz is with us."
>
> From a popular Polish song from the summer of 1939[180]

The news of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia came at a time when British-Polish relations were developing positively in March 1939. Since Foreign Ministers Beck and Duff Cooper had taken the first steps toward a joint alliance policy the previous summer, contact had never been broken. However, it had suffered as a result of the domestic political defeat of the Cooper-Churchill faction in the dispute over the Munich Agreement. The Republic of Poland, which had not been invited to Munich, therefore did not, as planned in Warsaw in the event of an escalation of the situation, join the Western powers in a war against Germany.

---

[179] Cf. *Chamberlain*, Diary Letters, p. 403, *Chamberlain* to his sister *Ida*, April 9, 1939. The worst of all the daredevils was *Churchill*.

[180] The song with these lyrics was played frequently on the radio throughout the summer and even after the outbreak of war. See *Lubienski*, Poland, p. 109 f.

country. Instead, as we have seen, it secured its own share of the profits from Czechoslovakia. Polish authorities proceeded to expel and expropriate the local population of German origin, thereby placing German-Polish relations under strain, which was further exacerbated by the dispute over the Warsaw government's revocation of Polish citizenship for tens of thousands of Jews living in Germany at the end of October 1938.[181]Domestic political developments in Poland became increasingly anti-Semitic and anti-German. [182]Nevertheless, almost in parallel with this, Ribbentrop conducted negotiations with the Warsaw government on Danzig, mutual recognition of borders, and accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact. The prospect of Poland joining the Anti-Comintern Pact, Ribbentrop's deterrent against Great Britain, naturally prompted British foreign policy to take action.

Ambassador Kennard reported from Warsaw with some satisfaction on the anti-German sentiment in Poland, which had been steadily increasing since the turn of the year 1938/39. There was no particular reasonforthis locally. The mood had been heightened by years of agitation against the allegedly eternal German land grabbers. Now even minor incidents were enough to trigger Polish outbursts against the civilian population of German origin. In this atmosphere, there was much speculation about the allegedly endangered position of Joseph Beck, who had earned himself a pro-German reputation, which was not conducive to good politics in Poland at the beginning of 1939. Beck had consistently kept his truly "purely Polish" intentions to himself. He was neither pro-German nor a staunch supporter of the West, but solely committed to the expansion of the Polish Republic, including its further expansion westward at the expense of Germany. At the end of February, he finally told Ambassador Kennard that "British and Polish goals in Northern Europe were

---

[181]On October 15, 1938, the Polish government published a decree that, as of October 29, denied Polish citizens the right to return to Poland under certain circumstances. This primarily affected the 70,000 Jews living in Germany, as the German Foreign Ministry suspected and as the Polish government confirmed upon inquiry. See ADAP, D, V, Doc. 84, p. 93. Poland responded to Germany's attempt to force those affected to leave for Poland before the deadline by refusing to allow them to cross the border.

[182]In retrospect, contemporary witnesses interpreted this as one of the reasons for the defeat:
The Jewish question divided the national community and preoccupied it to such an extent that it was unable to resist the regime of the clique of officers and bureaucrats who achieved absolute dominance under *Rydz* and *Moscicki*. They persecuted everyone, even Pilsudski supporters (*Slawek)* and former pillars of the regime (*Mackiewicz!*), while the national community quarreled over the Jews, which, incidentally, did not harm them, but only led to unprecedented incitement." Quoted from *Nienaski,* Mackiewicz, p. 9 f., written in May 1941. In order to alleviate the anti-Semitic Polish pressure somewhat, the Jewish organizations in Poland, together with their press, joined the anti-German campaign in the spring of 1939. Cf. *Marcus,* History, p. 424.

[183] Cf. *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 168 f.

more or less identical."[184] This could have been standard diplomatic rhetoric, but under the circumstances it was a significant signal. It was precisely this phrase that had been agreed upon at the meeting between Beck and Duff Cooper in the summer of 1938. Now, in this sense, the two sides were quickly moving closer together again. Beck agreed to a trip to London to clarify the formalities. It was to take place on April 3, 1939.

At the end of March/beginning of April, British politicians finally entered the fray and issued Polish politicians with the famous "blank check" for their policy against Germany. The driving force behind this was the usual suspects from the Focus connection, who persuaded Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to accept such conditions. Massive press rumors about the imminent annexation of Danzig by Germany fostered the necessary atmosphere of threat. The US Embassy in Warsaw also participated in this, with Ambassador Biddle spreading the well-known rumor that it was Ribbentrop who was pushing the hesitant Hitler to take immediate action against Poland. He argued that such action would have no consequences on the part of the Western powers and would thus lead to an alienation between London and Paris on the one hand and Washington on the other.([187] This assessment could hardly have been further from Ribbentrop's real position. On the contrary, the German foreign minister feared that Poland could now be the country with whose help Great Britain could advance the encirclement of Germany considerably and thus set in motion the intended conflict.

There was also a need for clarification within British diplomacy as to what exactly was to be achieved. Halifax explained the British position on Poland to his diplomatic representative in Warsaw. Technically speaking, this was in any case a blank check that also granted Poland the right to take up arms first at its own discretion. Although he urged the Polish government not to take an uncompromising or provocative stance toward Germany, Halifax at the same time conceded to Kennard that Poland had the right to do so, albeit ostensibly only in self-defense:

> "I have the impression that German aggression is so variable and insidious that, under certain circumstances, Poland could technically commit an act of provocation for the purpose of self-defense"[188]

---

[184] See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 148, February 25, 1939, see also *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 168.

[185] Cf. DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 175, March 4, 1939, cf. also *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 168.

[186] See also *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 174.

[187] See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 547. *Halifax* to *Kennard* and *Ogilvie-Forbes* on March 30, 1939, with the news that *Kennedy* had told him about such a rumor from Warsaw.

[188] See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 584, p. 554, *Halifax* to *Kennard* on March 31, 1939. *David Hoggan's* account of *Halifax's* statements must surely be considered a distortion of the sources: "He did not want Great Britain to remain neutral if the Poles forced Germany into war." See *Hoggan,* Causes, p. 451.

This is remarkable insofar as Kennard had expressly suggested to him the day before that British assurances should be limited to the case of an "unprovoked" German attack. [189] There was indeed no shortage of Polish provocations in the period that followed. Even more remarkable, however, is the reasoning Halifax had used a few days earlier, on March 27, to explain the planned move to the Foreign Policy Committee. British prestige had been damaged by the long chain of German successes, he had said. Doing nothing now would significantly damage Britain's reputation in Europe and the US and further strengthen German influence. He was in favor of choosing the only alternative that seemed available to him in light of these developments:
"Let's go to war."[190]

Almost exactly one year after Inskip and Halifax had openly threatened Ribbentrop with a European war in the event of Germany going it alone on the Austrian question, a decisive step in this direction had been taken. It was taken deliberately and of their own free will. Neville Chamberlain, who was still hesitant, was aware of the implications. On March 20, he had declared to the cabinet that war would not be waged to save a single country, but to overthrow the tyrant. A week later, Halifax initiated concrete preparations for this. From the British point of view, Poland's sovereignty and its alleged threat represented a suitable possible cause for war to settle accounts with Germany, not a value in itself.

The British military attaché in Berlin, Mason-McFarlane, had meanwhile joined the ranks of those who wanted war to start immediately, and did so with particular zeal. One day after Halifax's announcement that he wanted to go to war, he stated in a memorandum that it would be best to start the war next month. Like the British cabinet in general, he assumed that Germany was internally weak. He did not believe Ribbentrop's deterrence scenario and considered the German army to be weak. He saw the best way to incite an uprising in Germany as nothing less than a war of aggression, which he recommended at the end of March 1939:

> "War, and war now, with a 'close' front in the east, will hit them (i.e. the German population, author's note) quickly and hard and is likely to achieve the desired results. Without war and with increasing supplies from Germany's eastern neighbors, these results can never be achieved."[191]

But nevertheless, the final word on war and peace had not yet been spoken from the point of view of Chamberlain and Halifax, because perhaps British prestige could also be restored through an internal collapse of National Socialism.

---

[189] See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Doc. 573, p. 548, *Kennard* to *Halifax* on March 30, 1939.

[190] Quoted in *Newman*, Guarantee, p. 204.

[191] Quoted in DBFP, IV, Appendix V, p. 627, memorandum from *Mason-McFarlane* dated March 28, 1939.

restore the status quo. This would be followed by a revision of the territorial changes that had taken place in the previous year. Like Mason-McFarlane, the British government leadership also saw a connection between the crisis and war. At the same time, however, it recognized the dangers associated with this.

The situation looked different from Warsaw's perspective. The British guarantee in the above-mentioned wording, which Halifax ultimately pushed through, was seen there as a blank check for settling scores with Germany, which the Warsaw regime had been waiting for for years. The British Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister would have to honor it, and the more radical forces in London, working in collaboration with the Polish embassy, would ensure that this happened. In his initial reactions, Ribbentrop attempted to make German foreign policy appear as unimpressed as possible. He issued a circular letter to this effect:

> "For the rest, I ask that the whole matter be treated with great composure in discussions and that the nervous busyness with which the English are trying to enlist other states for their own purposes be ridiculed."(192)

At the beginning of May, however, he traveled to Rome again. The aim was to counter the new Anglo-Polish-French alliance, and it seemed appropriate to give the German-Italian relationship the formal status of an alliance. If one is to believe his negotiating partner Ciano and his notes, Ribbentrop appeared "relaxed" despite the situation and made a good impression both personally and through his delegation, which "were not the usual German types, who are usually repulsive, but pleasant young men who spoke foreign languages well and had learned to treat a lady in the salon politely instead of stomping around in their heels."[193] In fact, Mussolini was now no longer averse to responding to the pact concluded by the Western powers with a German-Italian pact of his own. The treaty that was finally concluded could be read as a mirror image of the wording chosen between Warsaw and London. It went down in history as the German-Italian "Steel Pact," a designation it unjustly bore. Ultimately, both agreements proved worthless in September 1939, the Western ones with Poland as well as the German-Italian ones. Poland did not receive the support promised by the Western powers in the treaty, nor did Italy enter the war on the German side.

Back in Berlin, Ribbentrop was once again exposed to the daily flood of ambiguous information. Shortly after the conclusion of the Steel Pact, there did indeed appear to be signs of détente coming from London, albeit on a less official basis

---

[192] PA AA R 29999, p. 408786, telegram dated April 12, 1939. *Ribbentrop's* telegram to the European embassies in the smaller countries (with the exception of the Iberian Peninsula). Requests that they refrain from activities against the ongoing British attempts at encirclement.

[193] Cf. *Ciano*, Diaries, p. 86 f., May 6 and 7, 1939.

Level. Ribbentrop's office reported this to the minister. A Mr. Holborne, considered by the office to be "the most important English journalist in Berlin," had returned from London and told an American friend that Neville Chamberlain would only continue the negotiations with the Soviet Union that had been initiated in addition to the Polish-French-British alliance.
"reluctantly" in order to make Germany more willing to negotiate with the Western powers. Chamberlain assured those around him that the upcoming Soviet pact would serve peace and not war. He still had reasonable hope of one day establishing contact with Mr. Hitler. The last sentence was marked in green by Ribbentrop and the report was designated for submission to Hitler. ([194])However, the next report on Holborne stated that he would be transferred to Moscow as a punishment and replaced by a more aggressive "Mr. Buttler." ([195])The negative impressions were mounting. On June 13, 1939, Ribbentrop's State Secretary Weizsäcker, in a conversation with Ambassador Henderson, directly addressed the main features of current British policy, which, through the treaty already concluded with Poland, "allowed the Poles to play with Britain's fate." Great Britain was also becoming increasingly involved on the continent through the ongoing negotiations with the USSR:

> "If anything, *the* only logic I can discern in British politics is that England is determined to wage a preemptive war and is working toward that end."([196])

Henderson reacted "sensitively" to this remark, dutifully denying any British intentions to attack and merely lamenting "certain Labour influences." However, he was aware of the impression that British policy must have made, which could perhaps even be rightly interpreted as a willingness to go to war "at any price," as he wrote to his own foreign minister weeks later.[197] In fact, as we have seen, Halifax himself had preferred to "go to war." Ribbentrop responded to these further developments and reports with his own signals to London, and had the opportunity to fall back on his old contact, Earnest Tennant. On July 31, Tennant sent

---

[194]PA AA 27092, p. 29429, report from Ribbentrop's office dated May 25, 1939.

[195] PA AA 27092, p. 29441, report from Ribbentrop's office dated June 1, 1939.

[196] Cf. ADAP, D, VI, Doc. 521, June 13, 1939.

[197]*Henderson* to *Halifax*, July 18, 1939, cited in DBFP, Third Series, Vol. VI, Doc. 347, p. 385. In his memoirs, *Otto Strasser* later emphasized that he had fought Hitler's National Socialism politically from abroad, but had been opposed to war. However, as we have seen, he also intervened in the Czechoslovak crisis by emphasizing to *Benesch* the advantages of taking a hard line. See Strasser, Exil, p. 98. Shortly after the Munich Conference, he described the founder of Czechoslovakia, *Masaryk,* in a book he wrote himself as an intellectual National Socialist alternative to *Hitler,* whom he accused of having Pan-Germanic-Prussian ambitions for world domination. See *Strasser,* Europa, p. 191 f. At the time of *Henderson's* letter*, Strasser* was attempting to establish a "German National Council" from Zurich and Paris, which was to include leading figures of the emigration. See *Volkmann,* Brüning, p. 344.

to Neville Chamberlain the report of a four-hour conversation he had on July 26 with Ribbentrop at Fuschl Castle. Tennant had requested the meeting in writing on July 10 and received a positive response on July 22 for the following week. He had previously asked Neville Chamberlain to what extent an initiative on his part as an "old friend" of the German foreign minister would be appropriate. The prime minister considered this a possibility, but, according to Tennant, asked him to make a secret trip without an official mandate and at his own expense. In a letter to Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain's personal advisor, Tennant suggested possible financial support for Germany as a topic of discussion in order to ease the situation. These were the same issues that Wilson had put on the agenda at the same time through the so-called Hudson-Wohlthat talks.

The conversation between Tennant and JvR itself was one-sided, if Tennant's account is to be believed. Ribbentrop spoke less about money and economic relations than expected, but instead gave a general and accusatory description of English politics. He said that for years it had been trying to oppose Germany's fundamental interests. In cases such as Austria, Czechoslovakia, and now Poland, opponents of German policy had been encouraged with promises that were later broken. This was not constructive, especially since every attempt by the German side to reach a fundamental agreement with Great Britain had been rejected. The foreign minister described British propaganda as ineffective insofar as it aimed to cause internal division in Germany. Tennant knew better from his contacts with potential German coup plotters. There was indeed internal division in Germany, even among high-ranking government officials and functionaries, but the question remained as to whether it would have any political effect.

Ribbentrop's other argument was, as always, deterrence. He pointed to the state of armament, the new fortifications in the west, and Germany's economic preparations, which would make war a costly affair for England. Relations with France were quite good, he said, leaving Poland as Germany's only enemy on the continent. Poland had to realize that it was too weak for this role and tone down its loud

---

198 See *Tennant*, Account, p. 215 ff. *Robert Hudson*, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Trade Ministry, and *Helmut Wohlthat*, an employee of *Göring's* Four-Year Plan Authority, discussed the possibility of comprehensive cooperation between the two countries. This included mutual respect for the spheres of interest of the British and German empires, which were still to be defined in more detail, agreements on land, air, and naval forces, and, on an economic level, "a common policy on the supply of raw materials and food to both countries." World trade issues were also to be regulated, as were the connection of European capital markets, currency issues, and more. See ADAP, D, VI, Doc. 716, p. 826, *Wohlthat's* report of July 24, 1939. Most interpretations assume that this was an attempt by *Neville Chamberlain* to bring about a surprise solution to the tensions, circumventing public pressure. In any case, indiscretions and press reports put an end to the talks.

Cease demands for the Oder border or the conquest of East Prussia. [199] If Great Britain still wanted war, Germany was ready. [200] However, Ribbentrop said that only three points were necessary to avoid war:

1. Poland must stop all insults against Germany and Danzig, both in the press and in the speeches of leading politicians and military leaders.

2. Something must be done about the press campaign in England, which was aimed at war.

3. Poland must understand that a war against Germany would be tantamount to suicide.

These were the only three points Ribbentrop mentioned after this recording, a recording that Tennant presented to the British Prime Minister three days later. It should be noted that none of these points were aimed at provoking or forcing a war. The British government was to exert its influence on its own press and the leadership of the Republic of Poland to stop their provocations. Ambassador Nevile Henderson had also feared their damaging effect for some time, despite his sympathy for their originators:

> "I would be confident if it weren't for the British press, or at least the part of it that is driven either by an intelligentsia that hates Hitler and the Nazis and sees red in every case without regard to facts, or by professional pessimists and Jews. If I were a Jew, I would move heaven and earth to attack Germany anytime, anywhere, regardless of the consequences. Although I sympathize with this attitude, it cannot become the basis of English policy."([201])

Henderson's ambivalent relationship to his post in Berlin is well expressed here. He regularly called for something like an unsentimental
"Realpolitik," which did not rule out compromise with the Nazi state. But his reports increasingly expressed his desire to get this task over with one way or another. In any case, the British press campaign affected him just as much as Ribbentrop did. At least JvR did not make any demands on Tennant regarding Danzig or even Polish territory or other matters. Ribbentrop's statements were aimed at defusing the situation. Ultimately, it was all a question of trust, and Tennant now withdrew accordingly. The state of German armaments suggested that Hitler wanted "world domination." A significant school of thought in England held this view. This would have prompted the counter-question

---

[199] Cf. *Tennant*, Account, p. 218 ff.

[200] See *Tennant*, Account, p. 219.

[201] See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Appendix I, p. 593, *Henderson* to *Halifax* on February 22, 1939. In a similar vein, *Henderson* wrote to *Chamberlain* a day later about the dangers of the British press campaign. See DBFP, III, vol. 4, Appendix I, p. 593.

raised by England's military strength, which was reaching new heights and, together with its allies in France and Poland, gave it a significant military advantage over Germany. But Ribbentrop was clearly tired of these debates. He referred to German policy and Hitler's well-documented fundamental views on England.

They parted ways, and as Tennant was leaving, he ran into Friedrich Berber, who also urged him to press for a quick German-Polish agreement while maintaining the English guarantee, even if that meant the return of Danzig to Germany. [202] Further discussions between Tennant and Ribbentrop's liaison to Hitler, Walter Hewel, yielded little new information in this regard. Hewel, whom Tennant portrayed in his report to Chamberlain as an old fighter and close friend of Hitler, reported that the German head of state and party leader was outraged by the Polish declarations of intent to march on Berlin. He was convinced that it was not he who had violated the spirit of the Munich Agreement and the German-English Consultation Agreement by marching into Prague, but Chamberlain with his policy of armament, which he had publicly pushed for after Munich.

"*Hitler has come to the conclusion that Britain wants war*. (This was reported to me on various occasions by Ribbentrop, Berber, and Hewel.)" [203]

As we have seen, there were understandable reasons for this conviction. This view was shared, at least in part, by British circles. Similarly, as mentioned above, Ambassador Henderson reported from Berlin at the time. He pointed out the impression that the current English maneuvers must have made in Berlin. This included not only the headlines in the press:

"Hitler may already have the impression that Britain wants war with Germany at any price. If he does not have it yet, he will soon. He has the advantage of being able to take the initiative at any time, and he knows it. Frankly, it is neither politically nor even fair to stimulate the Poles inappropriately." (204)

Hewel added to Tennant in this context what had further complicated the negotiations but had mostly remained unspoken. It followed on from his earlier observations:

---

[202] Cf. *Tennant*, Account, p. 223.

[203] Quoted from *Tennant*, Account, p. 225, emphasis in the original. Of the numerous statements to this effect, *Hitler's* letter to *Mussolini* dated March 8, 1940, is worth mentioning here: "Since the introduction of universal conscription in England, it had been quite clear that the decision to wage the next war against the totalitarian states had already been taken in the relevant British government circles." Quoted from ADAP, D, VIII, Doc. 663, p. 687. Symptomatic of the state of historical research in this context is the plea by *Adam Tooze,* who on the one hand calls for "due historical seriousness" in classifying such attempts at justification, but then cannot even bring himself to ask whether *Hitler* had reasons to feel threatened.

[204] *Henderson* to *Halifax*, July 18, 1939, cited in DBFP, Third Series, Vol. VI, Doc. 347, p. 385.

"Hitler has come to the conclusion that the Jews have so much influence on the English government that he must conclude that probably nothing else can be done but to fight it out, since Jewish influence would make understanding and
"eventual cooperation" between the two countries impossible."[205]

This coincided with Chamberlain's alleged later claim that he had been forced into the war. Such notions of "Jewish influence" were of considerable importance among political leaders in the 1930s. However, they took on a significance of their own in the categorically anti-Semitic ideology of National Socialism ruling in Germany. These convictions of Hitler's gave military warfare a special dimension in his view, even though it was clear that the Nazi regime itself had started a war against German Jewry in 1933. Despite his loyalty to the regime and the dictator, Ribbentrop was not interested in such ideological categories. For the time being, he appealed to Tennant to explore the last possibilities for negotiation. Tennant concluded his report with further descriptions by Hewel that Hitler wanted nothing more than a German-English alliance and with Ribbentrop's parting words:

"Goodbye, and let us remember your English proverb: It is never too late to mind."[206]

Nevertheless, under the influence of these circumstances, further attempts at mediation by various information carriers had a difficult time. [207]In addition to Tennant, Corder Catchpool also traveled to Germany and Poland in August 1939 and then back to Salzburg, where Fritz Berber, in a supposedly resigned mood, stood at the disposal of the foreign minister.[208] Discussions were held with Professor Unruh from Ribbentrop's staff about political possibilities. [209] Since all that could be heard from England, apart from provocations and non-committal utopian offers of negotiation over other people's land, was threatening silence,

---

[205] Quoted from *Tennant*, Account, p. 225.

[206] Quoted from *Tennant*, Account, p. 226.

[207] Despite such signals of negotiation, the British side maintained its stereotypes, including agitation against JvR. In July 1939, *Prince Philipp of Hesse* met the *Duke of Kent* at a private event, who described *Ribbentrop's* replacement as a precondition for any Anglo-German compromise. See *Schmidt,* Diary, September 17, 1946. ([208]) See *Hughes,* Friend, p. 161, and *Berber,* Conscience, pp. 93 f. In his memoirs, *Berber* emphasizes both his concern about the possible consequences of German use of force and, elsewhere, *Ribbentrop's* repeated references to him in those months of 1939 that "everything depends on maintaining peaceful relations with England and obtaining its consent to the new order in Central Europe
." Quoted from *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 102.

[209] At the end of June 1939,*Catchpool* had already spoken with SS-Gruppenführer *Wolff*, together with another Quaker named *Buxton*, who wanted to hold a "political" discussion. Both had agreed to return to Berlin in mid-July after a stopover in Poland and to be available for "unofficial negotiations," as *Wolff* then informed *Ribbentrop* via the Ribbentrop office. See PA AA 27092, p. 29487, report from the Ribbentrop office dated June 27, 1939.

At that time, Ribbentrop prepared himself for the seemingly inevitable war without giving up hope elsewhere. Convinced that only strength could prevent an English attack, he focused his attention on a possible German-Soviet settlement as a decisive option in the diplomatic game to weaken the English position. In the summer of 1939, the British had apparently successfully "bought off" another potential ally – Japan.

Among the problems Ribbentrop encountered when he took office as minister was the dispute over Germany's relations with the states in East Asia, particularly Japan and China. At that time, the two countries had already been at war with each other for some time. Until then, German policy had taken a largely neutral position in this dispute, with relations with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese government being somewhat better than those with Japan. Japan had isolated itself internationally with its actions in China, occupying Manchuria and separating it as its own "empire" in 1932. The country had been condemned by the League of Nations for its behavior and subsequently left the organization. Although Germany also left the League of Nations a year later after the renewed failure of the ongoing disarmament negotiations, even when Ribbentrop took office as minister, there was little to suggest that Japan would later become Germany's ally. The majority opinion in the Foreign Office and the military mission operating in China was to focus on good relations with the Middle Kingdom. Ribbentrop quickly achieved the opposite. The reason for this step can be easily deduced from the "Main Report," but remains incomprehensible without knowledge of it. ([210]) In fact, like almost all of Ribbentrop's other decisions after he took office as minister, this one was motivated by his conviction that Britain was planning a war against Germany, which had to be averted by strength. Here, Japan posed a potential military threat to the colonial possessions of the British Empire and was already indirectly in conflict with it, but China did not. Under Ribbentrop's premises, this led to a zigzag foreign policy course in East Asia, which initially sacrificed Chinese positions in the context of a rapprochement with Japan under anti-communist auspices. Finally, in 1939, he threw good relations with Japan overboard in order to conclude the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact—which, as JvR informed his delegation, was now intended to prevent an attack on Germany—only to then react by

---

[210] A good example of this is *Michael Bloch*, who, citing *Gerald Weinberg*, describes *Ribbentrop's* Japan policy as a "catastrophe" without understanding its deterrent objective vis-à-vis Great Britain, since he does not mention the main report and is obviously unfamiliar with it. See *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 194.

[211] The conclusion of the non-aggression pact probably constituted a breach of the secret agreement on the Anti-Comintern Pact, Article II of which stipulated that the contracting states would not, during the term of the agreement, "without mutual consent, enter into any agreement or make any commitment

the war that nevertheless broke out and the intervention of the United States, which had been foreseeable since the summer of 1940, to end up in the Italian-German-Japanese alliance against Great Britain and the USA, which was finally concluded in the fall of 1940, the so-called Tripartite Pact.

The signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union led to the resignation of the Japanese ambassador to Berlin, Oshima, in 1939, and ultimately to the resignation of the entire Japanese government. In Japan, there were fears that Germany's shift towards Moscow immediately after the heavy military defeat of Japanese troops against the Soviet Red Army in a battle in Manchuria (Chalchin-Gol) would now give the Soviets a free hand to march towards China and perhaps even Japan. Formally, this was not impossible, even though an armistice had been signed between Japan and the USSR. In any case, these drastic domestic political repercussions in Japan indicated that the Berlin government still had several options in the summer of 1939. Just as Stalin could choose between a pact with the Western powers or Germany, Germany had, at least theoretically, the choice between Japan and the USSR. Instead of keeping the USSR directly neutral and accepting the price of its advance to the west, there was also the possibility of concluding an anti-Soviet pact with Japan, which would have obliged Japan to side with Germany in a German-Soviet conflict. This threat of a two-front war must have been unpleasant for Stalin, as it was for the British government. In fact, Stalin only gave the green light for Ribbentrop's negotiations in Moscow after the Soviet-Japanese armistice agreement had been finalized.

In recent years, JvR had been campaigning intensively for the conclusion of a German-Japanese alliance. As mentioned above, this had meant abandoning the previously good German-Chinese relations, without much to show for it apart from the conclusion of the non-binding Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan. The Japanese government did not want to enter into a closer alliance as long as it believed itself to be in a position of strength vis-à-vis the USSR. This may have changed in August 1939. Under the impression of events, Japan might now have been prepared to sign a treaty.

On the other hand, the British government did not remain inactive here either. In buying off potential German allies, Winston Churchill was not the only one who believed himself to be superior to any German strategy, as he once said to Ribbentrop. Neville Chamberlain also attempted not only to prevent Italy from joining forces with Germany by recognizing its conquests in Ethiopia, but also to convince the Republic of Poland with guarantees

---

USSR from concluding any political treaties that were not in accordance with the spirit of this agreement." See ADAP, C, VI/I, Doc. 58, p. 116, November 25, 1936, Secret Additional Agreement to the Agreement against the Communist International.

which could be interpreted as blank checks for an anti-German stance. He did something similar with regard to Japan, which was actively supported by the urgent advice of the British Embassy in Tokyo. Ambassador Robert Craigie, whose transfer to Japan Ribbentrop had correctly interpreted as a significant signal in his final report as ambassador, had warned in December 1938 that "a separation of Japan from its current 'allies' could still be achieved. In his opinion, the price for this, however high, should not result in the political subjugation of China by Japan."([212])Whether this was desirable was a matter for the London headquarters to judge, but time was pressing, as otherwise both China and Japan might be lost.

The change in policy demanded by Craigie led to an Anglo-Japanese agreement on July 24, 1939, in the midst of the heat of the European summer, which was full of potential war developments. In it, the Chamberlain cabinet recognized the "special requirements" of the Japanese army for maintaining its own security during its war in China. This undoubtedly meant that England recognized Japan's right to occupy parts of China – or, according to the Japanese interpretation, all of China – and to suppress any resistance to this. Chamberlain claimed before Parliament that the agreement was not a "de facto recognition of Japanese sovereignty in the occupied territories of China."([213]) Even if this was true, it was in any case a considerable advance payment and, as was customary in British foreign policy – and had probably just happened with Poland and Italy – a trade in third-party rights. There was immediate speculation in Berlin about the extent of Japan's quid pro quo, which would probably consist of a declaration of general Japanese disinterest in the event of war in Europe, especially since this was reported in the international press.([214])

The Japanese embassy vigorously denied that such a deal had been struck, but Ribbentrop still did not seem to trust the peace. [215] In fact, there was no real way to do so, as there were so many secretive, isolated power groups in Tokyo pursuing foreign policy with, against, and among each other. Even the current ambassador to Berlin, Oshima, would probably not have known everything that had been agreed with London. This policy of withholding information was to remain the Japanese standard throughout the war. Ultimately, the Japanese navy went so far as to conceal the planned attack on the US fleet in Pearl Harbor even from its own cabinet.

---

[212] *Craigie* to *Halifax*, December 2, 1938, DBFP, VIII, No. 308, here n. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 159.

[213] Cf. Parl. Deb., 5th Series, H. of C., Vol. 350, column 993, cited here in *Sommer*, Powers, p. 262.

[214] Cf. ADAP, D, VI, Doc. 713.

[215] Cf. *Sommer*, Powers, p. 263 f.

What ultimately undermined the British attempt to create an "Asian Munich" with Japan in 1939 was, above all, the swift reaction of the US. Two days after the Anglo-Japanese agreement, Washington terminated the US-Japanese trade treaty that had been in place since 1911 on July 26, 1939. This was a serious blow to the Japanese economy, as would quickly become apparent in the following years. The US president himself was responsible for this decision, which he had apparently made within hours, "so that the dictators would not get the impression that they could get away with it."[216] Chamberlain had nevertheless succeeded in neutralizing Japan for the time being. It did not sign a treaty with Germany and did not take action against England in the following years. In fact, it was the Japanese-American conflict that ultimately led to the Japanese-English conflict in 1941. In 1939, Italy remained the last potential and even contractually bound partner of Ribbentrop's foreign policy. However, it was a partner that had a file in the cabinet for every conceivable case of alliance, perhaps even one specially ordered, as Ribbentrop's office reported from Warsaw in August:

> "Here it is claimed that the Italians ordered a memorandum from Poland before Salzburg in order to have material at hand to prove that the Danzig conflict would provoke a general war. However, the Italians do not want to expose themselves for the sake of Danzig."[217]

The term Salzburg stood here for the German-Italian talks held there, which were soon to become so controversial in the trial against Ribbentrop after the end of the war. On August 11, 1939, Italy's head of foreign affairs, Count Ciano, met with Ribbentrop at the Foreign Ministry's castle in Fuschl, and on August 12 and 13, he met with Hitler at the Berghof. His notes on these meetings are among the most frequently cited sources on those days. They were already presented to Ribbentrop at the Nuremberg trials because they allegedly proved both his determination to go to war with Poland and his supposed conviction that neither France nor England would start a war against Germany because of a German attack on Poland. Later research has accepted them, like so much else, mostly uncritically,[218] although, as we have seen in detail, Ribbentrop had been doing nothing else for a year and a half at that point but warning Hitler of an English threat of attack. However these notes came about, whether Ciano was repeating an impression he had mistakenly formed, or whether Ribbentrop and Hitler deliberately presented themselves to him in this way

---

[216] See DBFP, IX, No. 431, telegram from *Lindsay* to *Halifax* dated July 31, 1939, quoted here from *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 264.

[217] Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 657, report dated August 18, 1939.

[218] Cf. e.g. *Schmidt*, Außenpolitik, p. 332, who also takes this information from secondary literature.

that did not correspond to their real views; in any case, it does not reflect what was actually thought in Berlin.[219]

In his memoirs, Ribbentrop described the Ciano diary in the form presented to him as a forgery.[220] However, it is also possible and even probable that Ciano himself deliberately chose this way of recording the Salzburg meeting in order to achieve a desired effect. At that time, he was attempting to release Italy from its obligations under the German-Italian Pact of May 1939, even with a view to a possible war against Germany. In this respect, a corresponding report on Salzburg could provide the political ammunition that sufficiently supplemented the material commissioned in Warsaw for a breach of the alliance. ([221]In any case, according to Ciano, this was precisely the result that his reports from Salzburg were intended to achieve:

> "I am returning to Rome, disgusted by Germany, its leaders, and their actions. They have betrayed and lied to us. ... The Italian people will shudder with horror when they learn of the attack on Poland, and under certain circumstances they may even want to take up arms against the Germans. I do not know whether I should wish for Italy a victory or a defeat for Germany. In view of Germany's behavior, I am of the opinion that we have a free hand, and I propose that we act accordingly and declare that we have no intention of participating in a war that we neither wanted nor provoked."([222])

In fact, after the outbreak of war, the Italian leadership prepared for a possible entry into the war on either side, depending on how the war progressed. The Italian people, however, had no ambition to "take up arms," neither against Germany nor against the Western powers. It had to be the Italian leadership itself that forced the people into one of these conflicts. The later frivolous nature of Ciano's exploitation of the conflict and his own actions, such as the unprovoked declaration of war on France in the summer of 1940 and the reckless attack on Greece in the autumn of the same year, reveal the moralizing "shudder" of the record to be mere posturing. The fact that Ciano's statements clearly contradict documented

---

[219]*Hermann Graml* recently compared the motive behind *Hitler* and *Ribbentrop's* optimism toward Italy regarding the passivity of the Western powers with similar statements made to the Wehrmacht leadership, interpreting both as attempts to reassure. See *Graml,* England, p. 114 f.

[220] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 289.

[221]The Ciano diaries were intended to be political even as they were being written, as *Ciano* himself writes. *Mussolini* had asked him to write in them that a crisis with the Germans was inevitable. See *Ciano,* Tagebücher, p. 341, July 6, 1941. Their procurement for war purposes became the subject of an American intelligence operation in early 1945. See the detailed account by *Howard McGaw Smyth* in: https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol13no2/html/v13i2a16p_0001.htm.

[222] Quoted from *Ciano*, Diaries, p. 123.

Statements made by Ribbentrop and Hitler contradict their negotiating maneuvers prior to September 1, 1939, and do not allow for a definitive judgment on the course of the Salzburg negotiations. It is equally possible that the German leadership did indeed behave in an emphatically aggressive and arrogant manner, as it cannot be ruled out that Ciano merely portrayed them in this light for reasons of political expediency. In any case, Ciano, like Mussolini, was by no means averse to the idea of changing sides and going to war with Germany. Ultimately, the answer to the question of which side Italy would enter the war on depended on the outcome of the German offensive against France. If the German attack had failed, Italian troops would have been ready for war against the Steel Pact allies, and this would not have been "paradoxical," as has occasionally been written, but rather an appropriate expression of Italian fascist politics.[223]Italy could not be relied upon, but there was another important state that had not yet decided which side to take.

6. Ribbentrop's Soviet map

> "You have surely heard about certain negotiations that are currently underway and about the trip of the Russian ambassador and military attaché to Moscow. The day before their departure, the ambassador was received by Mr. von Ribbentrop and the military attaché by the High Command of the Wehrmacht, and on this occasion they were informed in detail about the intentions of the Reich government. I really can't tell you any more, but one day you will learn that something is happening in the East."
>
> Coulondre's report on a conversation with "X" [224]

> "The Russians are behaving in a friendly manner and making gestures that cost them nothing. At the start of the negotiations on August 11, the local ambassador Szaronov appeared before Beck to officially inform him that the Russian garrisons that had previously been stationed on the western border had largely been withdrawn."
>
> Report from Ribbentrop's office in Warsaw [225]

The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact is known in Western Europe primarily as the Hitler-Stalin Pact, while in Eastern Europe it is known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The latter is more accurate in that Ribbentrop and Molotov actually signed the pact in Moscow, but also because the treaty would have been virtually impossible to implement in Germany, i.e. under Hitler, without Ribbentrop's influence.

---

[223] "Paradoxically even on the eve of the war against France in June 1940, most Italian divisions were stationed on the eastern border, against Germany, so to speak." Quoted in Discussion on Ara, Austrian Policy, in: *Stourzh*, Powers, p. 175.

[224] Report by Ambassador *Coulondre* on a conversation with a Mr. "X," allegedly from *Hitler's* circle, May 7, 1939, cited in Gelbbuch, Doc. 123, p. 161.

[225] Quoted in PA AA, R 27 118/279 656, report dated August 18, 1939.

He agreed with Ribbentrop's conviction that Germany, given its military, economic, and political situation, had to choose between East and West, but that it had to keep both options open under all circumstances. He himself considered this pact to be his greatest achievement as foreign minister, based his policy between September 1939 and spring 1941 primarily on the lasting validity of the agreements reached, and later actively opposed plans for a German attack on the Soviet Union. Until 1945, Ribbentrop demonstrated a willingness to reach an agreement with the USSR if necessary, should the West insist on Germany's unconditional surrender. If successful, this would have been, in a sense, a repeat of the constellation of 1939. For JvR, this was a question of pragmatism and the basic assumption that it would be possible to enter into contractual agreements with the Soviets that they would adhere to.

Many Western Anglo-Saxon accounts assume that Stalin was partly responsible for the outbreak of World War II because it was only the conclusion of the treaty that made it possible for Hitler to wage a war against Poland that he had already planned. Some of Stalin's statements shortly after the treaty was signed point in this direction, as they reveal his intention from the outset to use the pact as a catalyst for rivalries among the imperialist powers, i.e., to start and fuel the expected war between them. In this sense, an instruction from the Moscow Foreign Ministry later explained the purpose of the undertaking to its own embassies: "Dictated by the need for war in Europe,"the treaty with Germany had been concluded. The view presented here is similar to some trends in research. However, it differs significantly in that Stalin based these ideas on a necessary conflict between the imperialists and saw Hitler and the National Socialists, as part of the imperialist competition, as a manipulable instrument for promoting such conflicts, but by no means as their sole cause.

Stalin conveyed this view to the Comintern leadership: "Without knowing or wanting to, Hitler is undermining the capitalist system," he attested to the German dictator on September 7,[227] although the latter was certainly true, the former was not. Germany's strategy of deterrence against the West's course toward war was based not least on the deliberate view that a war against Germany would be too costly for the capitalist Western powers. These powers would act accordingly and, ideally, refrain from declaring war out of self-interest. On this basis, as we

---

[226] Cf. *Hildebrand*, Reich, p. 805 f.

[227] These statements were noted in his diary by *Georgi Dimitrov*, Secretary General of the Comintern. Quoted here from *Bonwetsch*, Politik, p. 146.

see the Soviet Union brought into the European power system. Neither Hitler nor his foreign minister had any firm intention of starting a war against Poland, let alone a conflict on a larger scale. From Stalin's point of view, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact may have been an instrument for destabilizing the international situation. For Ribbentrop, it was the last card he had to play in his attempt to stabilize the situation arising from the crisis of 1939 and to prevent England from starting the conflict he had predicted a year and a half earlier. Signals from Moscow suggested that this was possible, such as Stalin's well-known party congress speech in March, in which he declared that he did not want to be rushed into war by the West. Other high-ranking Soviet representatives also made attempts at rapprochement, as Ribbentrop's office reported:

> "The Soviet Russian War Commissar Voroshilov recently made disparaging remarks about the policies of the Western powers to the wife of the German ambassador (sic) at a social event in Moscow, saying that relations between Germany and Soviet Russia could well be placed on a different footing once again."[228]

However, the game could be played on both sides. Two weeks later, on April 17, despite all public signals of distance, Stalin sent France and Great Britain a comprehensive offer for a three-way alliance, a supplementary military agreement, and a guarantee for all countries between the Baltic and Black Seas. However, the new Foreign Minister Molotov—who had certainly also succeeded his Jewish predecessor Litvinov in the spring of 1939 as a signal to Germany—made it clear that a Soviet guarantee to its western neighbors would not be possible without compromising their independence. A clause in the treaty provided for unspecified "concessions" to the USSR in the event of German aggression against these countries, which could occur even without the use of German force and therefore practically at Russia's discretion. De facto and de jure, the Red Army would have been able to march into any country in Eastern Europe at any time in the future if it deemed it necessary. It is likely that the "concessions" concealed nothing more than a plan for a gradual

---

[228] Confidential report by *Ribbentrop's* office dated April 1, 1939, cited here from PA AA 27092, p. 29313.

[229] According to *Nachum Goldmann*, the long-time president of the World Jewish Congress, *Litvinov* had explicitly announced this purpose beforehand: "When you hear of my resignation, you will know that the German-Soviet pact has been concluded. This means that war will break out a few weeks later, because *Hitler* will feel secure in the East." Quoted in *Goldmann,* Paradox, p. 47.

[230] Almost simultaneously, rumors arose that *Georgi Dimitrov*, the general secretary of the Comintern, had also been removed from his post because "Dimitrov's fanatical 'anti-fascist' course had been displeasing to *Stalin* for some time" and because Comintern policy was to be Russified. This information from Ribbentrop's office arrived from Moscow on May 3, 1939, from Moscow and was intended by *Ribbentrop* to be presented to *Hitler*. Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 725, report from Moscow dated May 3, 1939.

Sovietization of Eastern Europe, which Stalin then carried out unhindered under better conditions after 1945. When Hitler expressed concern about Soviet influence in this area in his speech to the Wehrmacht leadership on May 23, 1939, this prospect had already begun to take shape. However, the USSR was not the focus of the speech. Instead, Hitler reiterated his main concerns and observations regarding Poland and England. According to him, both states were on a course of fundamental confrontation with Germany for their own reasons. Poland was
"No additional enemy. Poland will always be on the side of our opponents. Despite friendship agreements, Poland has always had the inner intention of exploiting every opportunity against us."[231] Hitler assessed the case of England in the style of the main report by Ribbentrop, who was not present that day:

> "The Führer doubts the possibility of a peaceful settlement with England. It is necessary to prepare for conflict. England sees our development as the foundation of a hegemony that would invalidate England. England is therefore our enemy, and the conflict is a matter of life and death. ...
>
> England is the driving force behind Germany. Its strength lies in the following: 1.) The British are proud, brave, tough, resilient, and talented organizers. 2.) It is a world power in its own right. It has been constant for 300 years. It has been enlarged by allies. Its power is not only real but also psychological, spanning the globe. Added to this is its immeasurable wealth and the creditworthiness that goes with it. 3. Geopolitical security and protection through a strong naval power and a brave air force"([232])

In view of this list, resistance to this power seemed rather futile. According to the recollections of Colonel General von Brauchitsch, who was present, Hitler is said to have added: "I would have to be an idiot to slide into a war over Poland like the incompetents of 1914."([233])On the other hand, he had just gained the impression that there was no way around the war, which he here

---

[231]The content of this speech has been preserved only in the so-called Schmundt Protocol, which Lieutenant Colonel *Rudolf Schmundt*, who was present, is said to have compiled from handwritten notes. Quoted in *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 105. The record itself contains serious and irreconcilable internal contradictions. Cf. *Scheil,* Vereinte Entfesselung, Chapter D, III/2. The authenticity of the record is also not entirely undisputed, especially since other speeches were falsified in Western countries at that time, including a fictitious address by Chief of Staff *Halder.* See *Scheil,* Gegner, Chapter VIII, B. *Schmundt* himself died as a result of the assassination attempt on July 20, 1944, and therefore could not be questioned about the minutes. *Adjutant Nicolaus von Below*, who was also present, later confirmed that *Schmundt* had indeed taken notes: "Incidentally, the content of the transcript corresponded to *Hitler's* thoughts at that time, as I knew them not only from the meeting on May 23, but also from other individual conversations *Hitler* had with military circles." See *Below,* Adjutant, p. 164 f.

[232] Quoted from *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 105.

[233] *Hitler* on May 23, 1939, before the Wehrmacht leadership, cited in statement by Field Marshal *v. Brauchitsch* at the Nuremberg Trial. Cf. IMT, XX, p. 623.

also put on record. This speech is certainly not the "proof" of a conspiracy to wage war of aggression, as presented by the prosecution at the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945.[234] But it is a clear indication of how deeply impressed the German head of state and party leader was by the accuracy of Ribbentrop's predictions about British aggression.

British politicians were now apparently working to bring the USSR into line against Germany, while at the same time discreetly promoting the general differences between the European nation states from the Soviet capital. Rumors about the extent of political anarchy in European politics consequently reached a peak. The possible positive political consequences of the Western-Soviet talks were the talk of the day in the international press, but so were the difficulties. In June 1939, an employee of Ribbentrop's office reported from Holland on a commentary from the "anti-German hate monthly 'Cultur' of
June 15," which also hinted at later developments:

> Incidentally, things are not going well with Russia, our ally. The Kremlin is stubborn; it has little confidence in Chamberlain's sympathies, and not without reason. The British minister has proven all too often that he is speculating on a conflict between Germany and Russia, but the Kremlin is not interested in this; on the contrary, it is threatening to move closer to Germany.

After all, a treaty of this kind offered the Western powers the advantage of quickly and definitively encircling Germany with a military force that was vastly superior in numbers, and thus the opportunity either to maintain the status quo for the time being or, as Ribbentrop feared, to resolve the German problem offensively. However, this did not mean that diplomatic options in Eastern Europe had been exhausted. Stalin continued to signal his willingness to negotiate with all sides. The Soviet party leader took some remarks by Karl Schnurre on political issues as an opportunity to ask his foreign minister what Germany specifically wanted to offer. Ribbentrop had already registered such signals in early summer 1939. He was prepared to respond to them and attempted to gain the approval of the head of state. At the beginning of May, he invited Gustav Hilger, the embassy counselor at the German embassy in Moscow, to give a lecture on Hitler in Berchtesgaden. Hilger expressed his admiration for the progress of Soviet industry and Stalin's "new patriotism," which, in Ribbentrop's view, pushed the ideological hostility between the two states somewhat into the background.(237)

---

234 Read out as document L-79 in the afternoon session of November 26, 1945. The prosecution did not provide any information about the origin of the paper. See IMT, II, p. 312 ff.

235 Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 534, report dated June 29, 1939.

236 Head of the German delegation at the negotiations on a new trade agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union.

237 Cf. *Hilger*, Kremlin, p. 277 ff.

In mid-August, the new Soviet Foreign Commissar Molotov asked the German ambassador direct questions about Germany's position in the Baltic states, toward Poland, in the Japanese-Soviet conflict, and on German-Soviet relations. The word "non-aggression pact" was also already being bandied about. At the same time, however, Ribbentrop's office in Warsaw reported that Polish-Soviet contacts had been intensified from Moscow and had correctly identified the Soviet desire to formally agree to the Red Army's right of passage through East Prussia and Slovakia. (238)Marshal Voroshilov had promised the Western powers that, in this case, the "Bring about the end of Germany."[239]Ribbentrop was unaware of the existence of such humorous statements. However, this knowledge would have done little to change Germany's predicament. The Soviets had a choice. All other parties involved were under pressure to act as a result of the events of the past year and a half and their own power claims. Stalin could rightly note that the German problem was a "mine under Europe," as he had prophesied long ago. In order to resolve this conflict, the Polish army had withdrawn all security forces from its own eastern border because it had no other option but to trust the Soviet assurances. Now German foreign policy also soon saw no other way out than to trust the Soviets out of necessity. Corresponding impressions were conveyed from Moscow when the newly appointed Foreign Minister Molotov and Moscow "political circles" pointed out that ideological differences did not need to disrupt orderly economic relations and other proper relations.[240] However, this applied in both directions, and the same report from Ribbentrop's office that mentioned this also noted that the "indirect agitation against Germany" would continue unabated.

On August 18, Ribbentrop was able to send another report from his office to Hitler. It concerned a confidential American-Russian conversation between a Moscow correspondent for the New York Times who was passing through and a member of the embassy. According to the Russian, the Russian embassy in Berlin was generally trying to establish better relations with Germany. The American assessed the situation in Moscow as unclear. There were also pro-Western tendencies, even in the army, with the name Voroshilov being mentioned. No one knew what Stalin wanted: "Stalin himself liked to appear as a sphinx who knew how to methodically hide what he wanted even from his own staff."(241) At the end of August 1939, this sphinx had had enough...

---

238 Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 663, report dated August 10, 1939.

239 Quoted from *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 213.

240 Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 720, report by Ribbentrop's office dated June 13, 1939. *Molotov* had given a speech to this effect on May 31.

241 PA AA 27092, p. 29569, report dated August 18, 1939.

It is noteworthy that the German side raised the negotiations to the highest political level, whereas the Western powers had not even sent a minister to Moscow in months. On August 20, Hitler personally wrote to "Mr. Stalin, Moscow," offering to send a "responsible German statesman" and promising "in the shortest possible time" a "substantial clarification of the additional protocol desired by the government of the Soviet Union" on the exact definition of the respective spheres of influence.

Barely a day later, Stalin, who officially held no government office and was thus accurately described as "Mr. Stalin in Moscow," sent a telegram to Hitler personally and stated with private modesty: "The Soviet government has instructed me to inform you that it fully agrees with the arrival of Mr. von Ribbentrop in Moscow on August 23."[243] Ribbentrop accepted this invitation. A harmonious evening in Moscow followed, and in the early hours of August 24, 1939, the German-Soviet non-aggression pact and the secret additional protocol were concluded. In this matter, too, the German Foreign Office proved to be a reliable source of leaks. A few hours later, Hans von Herwarth, an employee of the German embassy, revealed the contents to the US embassy in Moscow. ([244]) The latter immediately reported this to the government in Washington, ([245]) without causing any particular reaction there.

Many attempts to place this agreement in its historical context have one thing in common: they view the treaty as a direct prelude to war, or even as part of the war itself. However, this is an exaggerated interpretation that draws conclusions about alleged intentions based on the subsequent course of events. The inclusion of the USSR in the European power system did not make war necessary, despite Moscow's ulterior motives; it could well have prevented it. Which scenario would have occurred depended on the further behavior of the Western powers, Poland, and Germany. From the German point of view, the actual purpose of the agreement was to prevent a major conflict. Ribbentrop himself therefore expressed confidence after the signing that this agreement had prevented an attack on Germany. For a year and a half, he had tried as minister to do something about the suspected British intentions to attack, but now, with Italy and

---

[242] ADAP, D, Vol. VI, Doc. 142.

[243] ADAP, D, Vol. VI, Doc. 159.

[244] His memoirs do not indicate that he had any particular motive for doing so. According to his own statements, he pursued "no particular goal" and apparently acted out of a general aversion to the regime, without deriving any particular motivation from his "non-Aryan" background, which he mentioned. See *Herwarth,* Zeitgeschichte, p. 188 f. *Herwarth* had previously passed on information about the ongoing preliminary talks for the pact to the Italian embassy. See *Weber,* Entstehungsgeschichte, p. 280.

[245] The telegram that the American Secretary of State held in his hands hours later is printed in: *Schickel*, Spiegel, p. 85.

the USSR had actually gained two important states as allies or neutralized them. However, Germany remained encircled between the mutual guarantee powers of France, Great Britain, and Poland and had to assume that, in the event of a conflict, it would have to fight both in the West and in the East. The new German-Russian treaty coalition changed "nothing" in this regard, as Poland's Foreign Minister Beck correctly noted on the evening of August 23. ([246])The fact that this did not happen later was solely due to the inaction of the Western powers, which did not keep their promise of assistance to Poland made in the summer and did not want to keep it under any circumstances.

The USSR was prepared to intervene in a European war and spread socialism as far as the Atlantic. It could promote this conflict, but not create it itself, and was prepared to wait for the favorable opportunity that seemed to have arrived in 1939. During Ribbentrop's negotiations in Moscow, despite the good atmosphere, Stalin repeatedly expressed his view of the balance of power between the USSR and National Socialist Germany. "I will never tolerate Germany becoming weak," he told Ribbentrop. Ribbentrop later reflected that this may have been an expression of the view that a major European war would indeed break out, in which the USSR would then intervene on the German side in a "supporting" role.[248] Stalin was probably modifying an old Leninist slogan that had been issued in anticipation of the inevitable next imperialist war and was soon to be revived by the Communist International after the outbreak of war: "Germany cannot win this war! England *must* not win this war!"[249]Even if one takes into account the considerable scope for arbitrary interpretation of Lenin's statements, this resulted in a fundamentally secondary role for Germany on the international stage, which was probably really how it was seen in Moscow. For the purpose of the final communist victory, Germany had to be supported for a while in a war against the capitalist West until the time was ripe for the Red Army to intervene.[250]In any case, this reflected an awareness of political superiority. Ribbentrop took note of this and assured Stalin that he had made a "good deal" with the treaty that had just been concluded. Despite everything, the non-aggression pact was a matter close to his heart.

---

[246]*Pagel*, Poland, p. 271.

[247] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 206.

[248] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 208.

[249] The Reich Security Main Office investigated various interpretations offered by the Comintern that explained this principle. Cf. *Fabry*, Beziehungen, p. 419.

[250] This is supported, for example, by *Paul Schmidt's* slightly different recollection of *Stalin's* statement, which according to him was: "I will never allow Germany to be defeated by the capitalist Western powers. Victory over Western capitalism is a fundamental interest of the Soviet Union." Quoted in *Schmidt*, Diary, April 1, 1947.

the mutual congratulations, the many toasts, and the friendly atmosphere.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact initially determined the situation in Eastern Europe on the basis of a Machiavellian balance of interests between the two most important states in the region. No consideration was given to the right of self-determination of the smaller nations, but attention was paid to reducing tensions between Russia and Germany, and thus this treaty was in keeping with diplomatic tradition. The preventive demarcation of spheres of influence between great powers and the liquidation of small states that resisted their allocation was part of the normal business of the imperialist era and was nothing less than unique. Such practices continued to be accepted in the decision-making centers of Western Europe, as Winston Churchill's attempt in October 1944 to divide the Balkans between Great Britain and the USSR in percentage terms per country during a visit to Moscow would clearly demonstrate years later.

In truth, the German-Soviet pact was initially little more than a second "Munich" under changed circumstances. Whereas a year earlier the Soviet Union had been shut out, while the Western powers and Italy once again acted as masters of Central Europe's borders in the tradition of Versailles, these powers were now excluded while the balance of power in Eastern Europe was being redefined in Moscow. However, the German-Soviet agreement did not in any way decide on the destruction of Poland or any other country. Instead, it expressly stated that "the question of whether mutual interests make the preservation of an independent Polish state desirable and how this state should be delimited ... will only be clarified in the course of further political developments." Border issues were excluded altogether. The text did specify where "in

---

[251] As usual, accounts of such statements are contradictory. The statement occasionally attributed to *Ribbentrop* (including by *Joachim Fest,* cf. *Fest,* Hitler, p. 810) that he felt in Moscow "as among old party comrades" apparently originated from the Danzig Gauleiter *Forster,* as *Ribbentrop* himself mentioned rather casually. Cf. *Ribbentrop,* Memoirs, p. 209. It is well known that *Ribbentrop* was rather distant toward his "old party comrades," whether they came from Munich or Moscow. Whether he actually adopted the expression as his own in relation to *Hitler* seems at least questionable. *Alfred Rosenberg* noted in his diary that the equation was "pretty much the most insolent insult that could be inflicted on National Socialism." See *Rosenberg,* Tagebuch, p. 82. *Ribbentrop's* remark to *Stalin* that the USSR might one day join the Anti-Comintern Pact itself is contrasted in *Molotov's* memoirs with Stalin's toast:
"Let's raise a toast to the new anti-communist – Stalin!" See *Molotov*, Politics, p. 12, interview from April 10, 1972.

[252] In October 1944, *Stalin* and *Churchill* personally agreed that Hungary and Yugoslavia were to be divided 50:50, while the USSR was to receive 90% influence in Romania and 75% in Bulgaria, and Great Britain was to receive 90% influence in Greece. See *Calic*, Yugoslavia, p. 175.

case of territorial political restructuring" in Eastern Europe, the border between the spheres of interest of both states would be located. However, the paper remained silent on the nature of the exercise of power in these spheres, which proved to be one of the shortcomings of the agreement due to the Soviet Union's totalitarian interpretation of its sphere of interest as an area of absolute domination by the Soviet system.

In Ribbentrop's view, however, the pact was not only the last card to play in the main problem facing him as foreign minister, but also a decisive success. The relaxed minister let his staff know this on the flight home. The British and French delegations, which had attempted in Moscow to involve the USSR in a possible German war front, had been deprived of this means. Now Ribbentrop could at least admit internally that behind his powerful rhetoric of the last year and a half lay the fear of a possible attack:

> "But the most astonishing thing about this nocturnal narrative was Ribbentrop's certainty, and according to his account, Hitler's as well, that this pact would not only prevent a two-front war, but also make an attack on Germany impossible."[253]

Now it would also be possible to combat the "Polish disease" without England and France being able to use a German-Polish conflict in their current state to launch such an attack on Germany. This was to be achieved by means of "surgical intervention," as he described it to his colleague Kleist· according to the latter's account. This could, but did not necessarily have to, mean a military strike. It could just as easily have been another Munich-style conference solution. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact theoretically provided backing for both. The involvement of the USSR in any such negotiations was assured, should they come about. In Moscow, however, as already mentioned, there were hopes that things might turn out differently. Shortly before the signing, the Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, once again openly stated this to Eduard Beneš, the former president of Czechoslovakia, who was now in exile in London. Beneš noted:

> "The Soviets are convinced that the time has come for a final battle between capitalism, fascism, and Nazism, and that there will be a world revolution, which they will trigger at the appropriate moment when others are exhausted by war."

When Benesch pointed out that the signing of the German-Russian non-aggression pact the next day would mean a German war against Poland "the day after tomorrow," Maisky added:

> "It won't happen quite so quickly. Maybe in two weeks. I asked him what they would do. He said to me, 'Of course we won't stand aside' ... My general

---

253 Quoted in *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 46.
254 Ibid. *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 46.

First impression: The Soviets want war, they have prepared conscientiously for it, and they believe that neither Poland, Germany, nor England can back down, that war will happen—and that they have preserved their freedom of action.

The Soviets thus made a realistic assessment of the potential for conflict within Europe. From the German perspective, however, the non-aggression pact was intended to end the crisis of 1938/39 with an international conference, at which, ideally, German ambitions with regard to Danzig and, if possible, the corridor in West Prussia could also be fulfilled. This would have taken the wind out of the sails of Britain's fundamental desire for war against the German revisionist program, as outlined by Ribbentrop, and at the same time would have made it virtually impossible for Britain to carry out its threats of war.

However, this prospect was highly hypothetical, as the leadership in Warsaw had no intention of agreeing to such a conference. With the unconditional support of France and Britain, it had the means to prevent it. Added to this were the extremely negative experiences of the past. Since the partitions of Poland in the 18th century, the idea that an international conference of other great powers could decide on Poland's borders had been one of the traumatic experiences of Polish national consciousness. Moreover, the last conference of this kind in Versailles had by no means satisfied Polish ambitions. The Poland of 1939 could not and did not want to invoke the borders drawn there, either politically or under international law. Significant parts of eastern Poland had only been conquered later in the Polish-Soviet War, while the arrangements in the west and north did not correspond to the ideas of the Pilsudski leadership. If, in addition, parts of Germany had already been promised to the Warsaw leadership as part of the Anglo-Polish agreements in the spring of 1939, then there was another good reason not to agree to a conference that was bound to lead to the opposite outcome. In any case, the possibility of another conference on Eastern Europe with the participation of the Western powers remained open even after the conclusion of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact. The days following the conclusion of the pact can be easily interpreted from this perspective: they were filled with tactical moves to secure the best starting position for this conference, which Ribbentrop envisioned as a kind of "Super Munich" involving the USSR.

Another potential partner reacted extremely negatively to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Despite the Anti-Comintern Pact, Japan had little reason to regard Germany's change of course as a breach of promise. After all, Ribbentrop's attempts to establish more binding German-Japanese agreements had been unsuccessful since 1931, despite considerable concessions such as the severing of relations with China.

---

[255] Cf. MHA-B, The Second World War, Box 61, record preserved in *Benesch's* private archive, quoted here from *Lukes*, Benesch, p. 352. This information was also included in *Benesch's* memoirs, as *Peter Kleist* notes. Cf. *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 96.

had been put off for six months. Instead, Japan had moved closer to Great Britain in the summer of 1939 and, after its defeat in the border conflict with the USSR in August 1939, had also withdrawn from Moscow. Nevertheless, the German-Soviet pact came as a surprise to the pro-German faction in Japan and led to a change of personnel shortly after the outbreak of the conflict. JvR then had Ribbentrop's report of October 7 on Japanese reactions to the new pact presented to Hitler, with the green marginal note "Oshima is returning to Japan." The report itself painted a realistic picture of developments in Japan. Economic circles were hoping for a second world war, not to participate in it, but to profit from it. Because of the pact with the USSR and the simultaneous anti-Comintern pact with Japan, Germany was now considered "untrustworthy," even though Japan itself had previously attached great importance to the difference between the USSR as a state and the Comintern: "The truly pro-German class, which recognizes and admires the will and ability of Germany and its leader, is very small, but sympathy for Germany is nevertheless greater than the initial violent reaction to the German-Russian pact would suggest."[256]The real relationship, the report concluded in a realistic assumption, will depend on German successes. When this was written, such successes had yet to be achieved in the context of the war that had broken out in the meantime. But after Ribbentrop's return from Moscow, there were initially new rounds of diplomacy.

[256] Quoted from PA AA R 27114, p. 37632, DR report dated October 7, 1939.

VIII. Diplomacy as an alibi

1. Conference or war

> "The confusion only increased when David Hoggan, an American fascist pure et simple, came out with an open apology for Hitler and exploited the truly weak point of anti-Hitler historiography by proving quite correctly that Hitler *did* not *want* the Second World War; but his ideological bias prevented him from recognizing that Hitler *was* in fact largely *responsible for causing* World War II.
>
> In fact, a Second World War would have been the last thing Hitler could have wished for in order to fulfill his ambitious world policy, and he tried to avoid a world war."
>
> Immanuel Geiss[1]

Ribbentrop's return from Moscow marked the beginning of the final phase of diplomatic, political, and military maneuvers that ultimately ended with the British declaration of war on September 3, 1939. "I needed an alibi, above all for the German people, to show them that I had done everything possible to preserve peace." This is how Hitler is quoted from the days around September 1, 1939,([2])which will be discussed below. In this phase, the attempts of those involved to assign responsibility for the coming major conflict to each other on the immediate threshold of war, or to achieve their goals after all with a limited exchange of blows or even by contractual means, culminated. After Ribbentrop had worked since his appointment as minister a year and a half earlier to implement Hitler's plans for a Greater German revisionism and at the same time to avert what he recognized as the danger of an English policy of encirclement and war, both issues now came to a head. Which interpretation of the causes of the war would prevail in the future was now being decided. If the Anglo-French-Polish tripartite coalition wanted war, then this should be evident from the manner of the final negotiations; this was the minimum goal of both Ribbentrop and Hitler. The British method of gathering evidence of their own innocence at an early stage, which Ribbentrop had addressed in his final report as ambassador, must not be allowed to succeed. With regard to the

---

[1] *Immanuel Geiss*: The Outbreak of World War II, quoted here from *Geiss*, Geschichtswissenschaft, p. 35.

[2] This quote was recorded by interpreter *Paul Schmidt*. See *Schmidt*, Statistician, p. 460.

Hitler's alibi quote is therefore often used to point out the artificiality of the negotiations at that time, which were not meant to be taken seriously. This is true insofar as these negotiations often did not explicitly state what was at stake, but rather what could be presented to the public afterwards in blue, yellow, and white papers that could be quoted by all sides, translated into the major world languages. This was a consequence of the experiences of the First World War and its aftermath. At that time, the guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles after 1919 was a political issue of the first order. Millions of deaths in an industrial world war raised the question of responsibility for this war to a whole new level, after questions of war guilt had not been at the forefront of European diplomacy until then. Wars were waged, peace was made, and politics began anew, typically with the suspension of criminal prosecution for war crimes committed before the peace agreement.

Supported by its own publications and archive material on Tsarist imperialism and its Western allies published by the Soviets in Moscow, the German government was able to capitalize politically after 1918 on its role as the victim of false accusations in the Treaty of Versailles. Both sides wanted to repeat this pattern in 1939. On the one hand, there was the "forced war"; on the other, the "unprovoked invasion." In each case, the opponents were to be blamed. The term "alibi" itself does not in any way refer to the intention of hiding an actual intention behind fabricated offers of negotiation. This was necessarily a misunderstanding, or rather an oversimplification, which Paul Schmidt, among others, fell prey to when he passed on the "alibi quote." In common parlance, an alibi is clear evidence that a person could not have committed a particular act. Anyone who wanted this alibi had to be verifiably willing to compromise, make appropriate offers, and expect (or fear) that the other side would accept the compromise. As Golo Mann has argued by way of comparison, in 1939, unlike in 1914, there were no nervous and panicky attempts in government circles to prevent an escalation. He concluded that one side, namely the English, had a clear conscience and the other had none at all.[3] This picture is based on both a romanticized view of the events of 1914 and a one-sided interpretation of 1939, which Mann also uses to completely avoid describing the actual events. In his case, it leads to the bold assertion that there is no "question of war guilt" for 1939. Finally, it culminates in the freely invented claim that Hitler "gladly and proudly" confirmed his sole responsibility "in familiar circles."([4]) As we have seen and will see further, he did not do this. On the contrary, even when the

---

[3] Cf. *Mann*, History, p. 912.
[4] Cf. *Mann*, Geschichte, p. 897.

While the war still seemed to be going well, he occasionally mocked those responsible in England in "private circles" for having started the war at the wrong time for themselves.

Returning to Golo Mann's comparison: there are also clear indications that the English leadership, for example, had coolly planned its own entry into the war in 1914, hence Winston Churchill's recorded satisfaction that[6] after the step had finally been taken was not an exception, but a symptom. On the other hand, the days of August 1939 were lively, emotional, and occasionally hysterical. If, nevertheless, an impression of calm could arise, it was due to the lack of questions from historians, the routine of diplomatic relations that had developed over a quarter of a century, and the war crisis that had been looming for a long time. People in Great Britain knew what they were doing, just as they saw things coming in Berlin and Warsaw.

As in the fall of 1938 during the Czechoslovakia crisis, German opposition circles came forward in August 1939 and made contact with the British government. Similar to the previous year, their concern this time was to advise the British leadership to take a firm anti-German stance. In view of British policy, which was provocatively oriented toward conflict, not only from Berlin's point of view, and which was also being pushed in this direction by Washington, this represented a politically strange and misguided desire. In London, at least, it could be inferred from this that there were still rifts, disagreements, and thoughts of a coup d'état within the German leadership, even at the highest levels, particularly in the Foreign Ministry and even among Ribbentrop's closest associates. His close associate Reinhard Spitzy was also involved in the maneuvering to achieve the desired British threat scenario. Although he had not been a diplomat since April 1939 and was not actually allowed to leave the country due to foreign exchange and travel restrictions, Nevile Henderson, the British ambassador, provided him with a "special visa valid for several years" for England after he lost this travel option. Henderson may have had something in mind when he granted such a privilege, which was quite extraordinary for the time. In any case, this made it possible.

---

[5] For example, on August 16, 1942: *"Churchill* and his comrades decided to wage war against us in a few castles a few years before 1939! My source: *Lady Mitford*. ... The moment England introduced universal conscription (i.e., in the spring of 1939, author's note), the die was cast against us! Then the guys just couldn't wait! If history had lasted another three or four years, they would have had an army of 25 to 40 divisions." Quoted from *Jochmann,* Tischgespräche, p. 342 f.

[6] *Churchill's* smile after the declaration of war had far-reaching consequences. *Peter de Mendelssohn* made a half-hearted attempt to dispute the fact in his Churchill biography: "But he smiled—if he really smiled—because he had enough imagination to picture the tears that were coming." Cf. *Mendelssohn*, Churchill, p. 379.

[7] Cf. *Spitzy*, Confessions, p. 361. Elsewhere, *Spitzy* speaks openly of conspiracy in connection with the British government and of the alarming candor with which "*Henderson's* very nice private secretary" gave him "a

possible that Spitzy was able to fly to London to the embassy in August 1939 on Kordt's instructions without causing any fuss. According to his statements, he had been instructed to tell Kordt that he should advise the British to build up a threatening scenario. Kordt then immediately drove to Robert Vansittart with this message.[8] After Spitzy's return to Berlin, Henderson is said to have implored him to continue his efforts to spread awareness in Berlin of the British readiness for war. [9]

Now, this message, which was apparently disseminated several times at the time, had two parts: First, the British government is ready for war, and second, the German government, namely the foreign minister, either does not know this or is simply unwilling to believe it. As we have seen, the second point is completely inaccurate. On the contrary, Ribbentrop and Hitler believed that Britain was on a war footing and considered this to be virtually unshakeable. They were heading toward a crisis situation more out of a mixture of fear—some of it justified—and their own ambitions than out of their own desire. It was intended to force England to dissolve the Polish-French-English triple coalition within the framework of a conference solution to the contentious issues. A man like Robert Vansittart, the former permanent undersecretary in the Foreign Office and current head of British public relations for war preparations, whom Kordt and Spitzy sought out as a discussion partner, was now the very last person who would have shied away from such a crisis situation. On the contrary, he saw this scenario as an opportunity for the conservative opponents of the Nazi regime to eliminate it and revise the territorial decisions of 1938/39. This meant the prospect of a comprehensive upheaval in Germany, which, in his view, should ideally be followed by a return to the conditions that existed before 1871 or 1866. This radicalism in parts of the English leadership seems to have remained hidden from the German opposition. It was thus part of a tradition that Winston Churchill had been familiar with for almost thirty years. Before the First World War, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he had been able to read the reports of the long-standing Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel. During those years, Bebel attempted to motivate the British leadership with secret information about German armaments and finances to engage in an arms race that, in his opinion, only Great Britain could win. The deeper reason for this betrayal of secrets and his country lay in his rejection of the Prussian state, which he described to his English contacts as terrible and unreformable. He saw the better, indeed the democratic, alternative in

---

Business card with ppc and farewell greeting," which probably did not escape the attention of the Gestapo. See *Spitzy*, Confessions, p. 379 f.

[8] Cf. *Spitzy*, Confessions, p. 362. Such conspiratorial assignments *from Kordt* then became the norm during the war, reports *Spitzy*, albeit internally for connections *between Kordt and Canaris* or *Kordt and Weizsäcker*. Cf. *Spitzy*, p. 374 ff.

[9] Cf. *Spitzy*, Confessions, p. 364.

embodied in British imperialism. Although the dissident travelers of 1938 and 1939 came to London for slightly different reasons, their activities and, in particular, their external impact must have been objectively similar to Bebel's actions. National Socialist Germany was as unsuccessful as the imperial empire in forming a cohesive leadership elite. The result was treason, even among high-ranking officials, which deliberately damaged German interests, as demonstrated by the successful efforts of Ernst von Weizsäcker and Abwehr chief Canaris to prevent Spain from entering the war on the German side. More fundamentally, a state whose political elites identified so little with it had to be regarded as weak by the outside world.

No one in Great Britain would have thought of expressing political differences at the level of undersecretary or opposition leader through treason. There were traitors there too, mainly informants for the Soviet Union, as it later turned out. But they were several levels lower down. It was perhaps possible to ascertain the political leanings of those in key positions in London in background discussions, as Ribbentrop had attempted to do with some success. He had reported who the opponents were and how they worked, not without making the reservation that some of them might only be playing assigned roles. This mistrust continued to have its causes. Vansittart and Churchill wanted to deliberately push things to the extreme, while Chamberlain and his entourage still did not rule out a compromise with National Socialism, for example in the context of a conference. For his part, Ribbentrop had secured the backing of the Soviet Union for such a conference with the conclusion of the Moscow Treaty, in which Stalin or a Soviet delegation could participate alongside the four well-known Munich powers and Poland. The question remained whether the deterrent scenario of an otherwise imminent war would allow such a conference to take place despite the commitments on all sides.

In fact, in a letter to Hitler dated August 22, British Prime Minister Chamberlain had not ruled out a meeting of the powers,[10] but with two significant changes compared to Munich: the conference was to bring about direct negotiations between Poland and Germany, in which other powers would only act as mediators, and "any agreement must be guaranteed by other powers upon its conclusion."[11] In other words, there should be no ambiguous provisions over the heads of others, as had been the case in Munich, but precise agreements between the parties involved. Chamberlain knew full well that the weakness of his own position in Great Britain no longer allowed for a second "Munich" on his own. One day later, Hitler replied and, after a long lament about the German

[10] See Blue Book, Doc. 56.
[11] See Blue Book, Doc. 56.

willingness to negotiate, English stubbornness, and Polish cruelty to recognize his willingness to negotiate under these conditions. However, Chamberlain should see how he could bring Poland to the negotiating table, because "the question of dealing with European problems in a peaceful manner cannot be decided by Germany, but primarily by those who, since the crime of the Versailles Dictate, have persistently and consistently opposed any peaceful revision."(12) This referred, among others, to Poland, but also to England itself. Hitler repeated this idea, that he had been forced to take unilateral revisionist steps only because the other side had refused to negotiate, in other letters as well, for example to French Prime Minister Daladier.

The British had no means of forcing Poland to participate in such a conference. However, such coercion would probably have been necessary, because since the turn of the month from March to April, radical elements in Warsaw had been given free rein, increasingly whipping the Polish public into a war frenzy. At the end of April 1939, in a speech that was later widely quoted, the new chairman of the National Democrats, Kazimierz Kowalski, already demanded that the Oder-Neisse line be the German-Polish border after the next war.[13] This radical choice of words was by no means caused by the latest development at the time, namely the German head of state's statement that Poland and England, with their offensive alliance against Germany, had violated and nullified the existing non-aggression and fleet agreements. Two weeks earlier Kowalski had spoken in a very similar vein (14) and for the first time at the beginning of the month in Lodz (15). His party colleague Jedrzej Giertych took up this theme and published a series of articles during the summer under the title
"Polish territories under German rule," in which he demanded, among other things:

"After the impending war, ... Poland should annex Danzig, East Prussia, Upper and Central Silesia, including Breslau, and Central Pomerania, including Kolberg; Poland should also establish a series of buffer states under its protection and rule along the Oder and Neisse rivers."[16] Ribbentrop was able to glean even more far-reaching demands from the Polish press. Radical advocates of the Polish idea of expansion to the west had long held the view that in ancient times, the Romans had not encountered Germanic tribes on the Rhine, but rather the Slavic ancestors of Poland. Consequently

---

[12] ADAP, Series D, Vol. VII, Doc. 201.

[13] Cf. *Kowalski*, Polska, passim.

[14] Cf. "Wszechpolak" No. 12 of April 9/16, 1939, as well as *Kotowski*, National Democracy, p. 179, with archival information on the location of the article.

[15] This was immediately picked up by the German press at the time, while the British Embassy, as usual, tried to play down the speech as unimportant. Cf. BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, p. 102, report from *Kennard* to *Halifax* dated April 8, 1939.

[16] Documented by *Giertych*, J.: Pol wieku polskiej polityki, (1947), pp. 180/181, quoted in *Terry*, Polands Place, p. 32.

In the mood of the summer of 1939, not only Berlin but also Cologne was declared a Polish city in the press, as JvR indignantly pointed out to Burckhardt, the League of Nations commissioner in Danzig. [17] This was not only ridiculous, but also an expression of a radical political will that was now seeking its chance. [18]

British policy, on the other hand, had its hands tied by its own formal guarantee to Poland, the Warsaw leadership's war course, which deliberately took into account a military exchange of blows, and also by the growing determination of public opinion in England. Winston Churchill, Wickham Steed, and the public relations work of the "Focus" network had achieved great success over the past three years. In this situation, Prime Minister Chamberlain resorted to bringing the US into play. On
On August 23, Sir Horace Wilson met with US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy at his request. Kennedy immediately reported the British plan to Washington by telephone: "The British expect us to do this and only this, namely to put pressure on the Poles. They feel that their commitments prevent them from doing anything of the sort, but we could."[19]

This was really the opposite of what President Roosevelt had declared to be the official policy of the US when, in January of that year, he counted the "independence of a large number of states" in Eastern Europe among the vital interests of the United States. The president had little inclination to strengthen Germany through further successes and certainly no desire to exert pressure on Poland for this purpose, since American policy had been encouraging the Polish government to pursue an anti-German policy since the spring of 1939. Immediately after the signing of the Soviet-German secret agreement on the delimitation of spheres of interest, its contents had become known through betrayal from the German embassy, as mentioned above. Washington was therefore aware of its provisions and naturally did not believe that it was the American president's job to turn these German-Russian agreements into political reality by exerting American pressure on Poland. Chamberlain's plan was rejected. If Kennedy's report is to be believed, the prime minister already knew what the consequences would be: "He says that it would be the futility of all efforts that would be so terrible; after all, they cannot save the Poles, they can only wage a war of retaliation that would result in the destruction of the whole of Europe.

---

[17] Cf. *Burckhardt,* Mission, p. 294.

[18] One example is *Josef Kisielewski's* richly illustrated polemic, published in 1938/39, which claims large parts of Germany as historically Polish and also lists the Rhine as lost territory in the introduction. See *Kisielewski*, Ziemia gromadzi prochy, p. 12.

[19] *Moffat,* Papers 1919–43, 1956, p. 253; *Cordell Hull*, Memoirs, vol. 1, p. 662; quoted in *Taylor*, Origins, p. 312.

will have."[20] In this mood, Chamberlain offered his resignation on August 24, 1939, one day after Kennedy's mood report.[21] However this decision was not accepted by the royal family. Chamberlain had no interest in leading his country into a war that he had not sought, at least not under these circumstances, and which he assumed his German counterpart did not want either. If this war was still to be prevented, then it would have to be through a confidence-building international agreement, but Chamberlain no longer had the necessary domestic support to conclude such an agreement. In a way, the denunciation of his policy as weak "appeasement" now provided the ammunition with which the English war party could push through an English declaration of war, with Great Britain appearing, in a sense, as the attacked nation. Resignation would have jeopardized this ammunition. Chamberlain had to stay.

For the time being, the British government did not reveal such events behind the scenes. After the conclusion of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, the British position had not officially changed, as Chamberlain had his Foreign Secretary explain in the House of Lords.[22] Direct German-Polish negotiations were called for, possibly with British participation and subsequent international guarantees of the outcome. However, on August 25, the British government supplemented the mutual guarantee agreement with the Republic of Poland with a formal alliance treaty, which also contained a secret agreement. Germany was the only country named as a possible enemy in the secret agreement.[23] This represented a restriction of the previous

---

[20] *Kennedy* to *Hull*, August 23, 1939, in: "Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States" 1939, vol. 1.

[21] See *Nicolson*, Diaries, p. 339, August 24, 1939.

[22] See Blue Book, Doc. 65.

[23] Cf. *Hofer*, Entfesselung, Doc. 31 and Doc. 32, p. 196 ff. See there for the text of the alliance treaty and the secret agreement. Interestingly, the reports from the German embassy in London on the conclusion of the alliance agreement were not printed by the Allied editors of the ADAP, despite being available there. Instead, the editors refer to the National Socialist publication 'Dokumente der Deutschen Politik' (Documents of German Politics), which, for obvious reasons, only contains the official text of the alliance, not the secret agreement. See ADAP, D, VII, p. 253, editor's note, and DDP 7/1, No. 23b, p. 120, note 3. The British-Polish pact was to remain in force for five years from the date of its signing. It was not renewed by the British government in 1944. See *Jędrzejewicz,* Parliament, II, p. 418, statement by Foreign Minister *Eden* in response to a question from Conservative MP *Bullock* on March 9, 1944. This statement is missing from *Stephen King-Hall*'s 1945 collection of statements by the British Parliament on Polish issues, although the editor expressly claims that it is complete. See *King-Hall,* Parliament, Preface. The secret agreement, which was still being kept quiet, continued to pose a political problem after the pact was not renewed. At the War Cabinet meeting on March 22, 1945, *Eden* then spoke of "letters that have been exchanged in recent years and which would cause embarrassing difficulties of explanation if the Poles were to publish them." See http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/cab_195_3_transcript.pdf, last accessed on May 5, 2012.

This represented a renewal of the guarantee promise made in March 1939, which in principle would also have applied to a Soviet attack on Poland. As a kind of compensation, the new agreement, together with its secret addendum, retained a carefully worded license for a possible Polish offensive against Germany.

Although it officially applied only in the event of an attack by "a European power" on one of the contracting parties, "attack" meant nothing less than
"any action (sic) by a European power" that "directly or indirectly (sic) threatens the independence of one of the contracting parties and is of such a nature that the party concerned considers armed resistance to be of vital importance."[24]This point was explicitly understood to refer to the "case" of Danzig, as specified in the secret agreement. Elsewhere, this provision was extended to third countries and territories whose "independence and neutrality" could be endangered, with Belgium, Holland, and Lithuania being explicitly named as possible "cases." To ensure once again that no German military attack was necessary to establish the *casus belli*, one article referred to the threat to the independence of one of the contracting parties through attempts at "economic penetration" or "in any other way" (sic) as a cause for war.[25] "Any" cause for war could always be found on this list if necessary. In particular, the secretly included "Danzig case," with its purely National Socialist government and the constant dispute over real or alleged harassment between Poles and Germans taking place there, made war possible at any time. This point was particularly explosive.

If this secret agreement had any meaning at all, it could only be to regard any restriction of Polish and/or extension of German rights in Danzig as a cause for war. However, this was repeatedly denied by the British government to the German government in the days that followed. Danzig was seen as a possible subject for negotiation and ultimately became the subject of the negotiation proposals presented by Ribbentrop on August 31. This double game of making Danzig an official subject of negotiation while secretly giving an absolute guarantee of Polish interests in Danzig did nothing to defuse the crisis, but necessarily intensified the existing German-Polish antagonism. If this crisis was to be defused, a statement would have been necessary.

Eden spoke out in favor of publishing the secret protocol at the same place, which happened in 1945 under the editorship of the Foreign Office as Cmd. 6616, as
"Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Polish Government regarding Mutual Assistance, (with Protocol)". The secret protocol had been omitted from the first publication in 1939 (Cmd. 6144). The secret protocol was finally printed for the first time in the volume "Documents on International Affairs," edited by *Arnold Toynbee*, London 1951, p. 469 f.

[24] Quoted from *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 197.

[25] Cf. *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 197.

From London, for example, the message could be that, in view of the turmoil of the past two years, no further changes to the status quo were desired and that, as a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles and thus guardian of the Free City of Danzig, the current situation should not be altered in the interests of international relations until the situation had calmed down. All in all, the new Anglo-Polish treaty showed that Ribbentrop's appearance in Moscow had apparently made little impression in London. After all, there was officially a certain British offer on the table, the content of which still had to be examined. However, given the content of the Polish-British secret agreement, there was in fact no longer any possibility of negotiation. This should be noted first, however, in order to be able to correctly assess the following days.

On the morning of August 25, in the presence of Ribbentrop, Hitler made a statement to British Ambassador Henderson. In it, Hitler repeated several times the "risk concept" and the necessary weakening of England in the event of a British-German war, whatever its outcome, which would be even greater than before due to the new German-Russian treaty. In conclusion, he proposed nothing less than a German-British variant of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact. He "wanted to take a step today toward England that was just as decisive as the step toward Russia that had led to the recent agreement."([26])To ensure that Henderson understood the intellectual background to the offer, Hitler referred to the global balance of power:

> "The claim that Germany wants to conquer the world is ridiculous. The British Empire covers 40 million square kilometers, Russia 19 million square kilometers, America 9.5 million square kilometers, while Germany covers less than 600,000 square kilometers. So it is clear who wants to conquer the world."[27]

The message was also clear: Germany is small and wants to remain so. It does not threaten the global balance of power or the British Empire. On the contrary, Germany is willing and able to promise Great Britain assistance "whenever such assistance may be required."[28]In return, Hitler expected the British to concede to his view that the "Danzig and Corridor problem" had to be solved, without saying directly how he thought it should be solved.

Henderson took only limited note of this. His report on the conversation, which he sent to London on the same day, together with a written version of Hitler's verbal communication, which Ribbentrop later sent to him at the embassy,[29] mentioned Hitler's comparison of the Soviet-German

---

[26] Cf. ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 265, p. 234.
[27] Ibid., ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 265, p. 234.
[28] Cf. ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 265, p. 235.
[29] Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 69.

pact with the possible British-German agreement, nor did he accept the British Empire's "personal guarantee." Henderson focused exclusively on German-Polish issues. Hitler, who spoke "with the utmost seriousness and apparent sincerity," "had no desire to be narrow-minded in any agreement with Poland," and "all he needed for an agreement with Poland was a gesture from Great Britain showing that it would not be unreasonable."[30]Hitler had also tried to convince the British that the impetus for a settlement with Poland must come from England. He did not reject direct German-Polish negotiations, as Henderson had suggested, but declared them pointless: "He acknowledged the good intentions of Mr. Beck and Mr. Lipski, but said that they had no influence on what was happening in Poland."([31])

In fact, as already mentioned, it is difficult to imagine what Germany and Poland could have negotiated at that point in time. Hitler hinted to Henderson that he wanted to claim Danzig, which the British government had assured the Polish government in writing that very day would be a possible cause for war against Germany. Henderson may not have known this, but in any case he did not mention it. Josef Beck, who was in charge of foreign policy in Warsaw, was determined not to accept any offers, ultimatums, or other documents from Germany and instructed Ambassador Lipski accordingly. He stuck to this line until the outbreak of war, without everyone in London understanding its internal logic. As late as September 1, shortly after midnight, Foreign Minister Halifax telegraphed Warsaw that he "did not see why the Polish government should find it difficult to authorize the Polish ambassador to accept a document from the German government."([32])The contrast between Poland's self-confidence and Czechoslovakia's dependence on Western support was indeed great.

Josef Beck was optimistic about the situation. He stated that the political maneuvers of the Reich Chancellor only showed "how desperate Hitler's situation was."([33]) The accuracy of this observation became apparent in the late afternoon of August 27, when Hitler spoke about the "seriousness of the situation" at a meeting of Reichstag deputies who had gathered in preparation for an emergency. He went on to explain that he would only be satisfied with Danzig and the Corridor as a "minimum demand" and would otherwise wage war. This war, he then informed the shocked deputies, "would be difficult, perhaps even hopeless (sic), and then defeat would be preferable to surrender."

---

[30] Ibid., Doc. 69.
[31] Ibid., Doc. 69.
[32] Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 100.
[33] Quoted in *Fest*, Hitler, p. 808.

preferable."[34]Germany's head of state and party leader had become so worked up about the hopelessness of the situation in view of what he believed to be an imminent British-Polish attack that he finally asked the assembled German Reichstag almost bluntly for his own death:

"As long as I live, there will be no talk of surrender. If any of you believe that I am not acting solely out of love for Germany, I give you the right to shoot me down."[35]

Remarkably, among all the numerous assassins who attempted to kill Hitler, whether they were political opponents of all stripes or coup plotters from the ranks of the armed forces, there was never anyone who simply picked up a gun and fired. There were plans for bomb attacks, and several were carried out. Plans for poison gas attacks were hatched, but no shooter of any political persuasion fired a shot on the countless occasions when Hitler drove through large crowds in an open car. No officer or party member raised the pistol that he could easily have brought to a reception, just as the bomb attacker Stauffenberg brought his bomb to headquarters several times and then took it out again because the composition of those present was unsatisfactory for an assassination attempt. Hitler, who in the later years of the war was apparently increasingly surprised to still be alive,[36] returned quite literally to his request for execution in 1939 after the ultimately failed bomb attack of July 20, 1944:

"These conspirators are nothing like revolutionaries; they are not even rebels. If Stauffenberg had pulled out a pistol and shot me, he would have been a man. What he did was cowardly."[37]

"Didn't you have a captain with a pistol?" Erwin Rommel is also said to have asked after July 20. In fact, "they" did not have one and collectively shied away from open action. On August 27, 1939, the Reichstag also left its weapons, insofar as they had been brought along and were available, in their pockets. The deputies responded to the head of state's speech, in which he justified the non-aggression pact with the USSR as an expression of the desperate situation and as a "pact with Satan to exorcise the devil," with only "weak, dutiful applause."[38]

---

[34] Quoted from *Groscurth*, Diary, p. 190. *Groscurth*, who was not present at the speech, cites two unnamed "sources" for the quotations.

[35] Quoted from *Groscurth*, Diary, p. 190, August 27, 1939.

[36] He opened his radio address after July 20 with the words: "I do not know how many times an assassination attempt has been planned and carried out against me." Quoted from *Domarus*, Hitler II, p. 2127.

[37] Reported by his servant *Linge*, quoted here from *Domarus*, Hitler, II, p. 2126.

[38] Quoted in *Groscurth*, Diary, p. 190, August 27, 1939.

Politically speaking, Hitler and Ribbentrop set about remedying what they saw as the main shortcoming of the German-British talks: the lack of concrete proposals. Since Henderson had flown to London on the morning of August 26 to work on a British response to Hitler's verbal communication of the previous day, the Swedish contact Birger Dahlerus, who had just returned from there, was called in. Dahlerus, a Swedish entrepreneur who had grown into the role of a neutral mediator through his acquaintance with Hermann Göring and his business contacts in Great Britain, was presented with six concrete proposals for a combined German-English and German-Polish settlement by Hitler himself on the evening of the same day. Point one repeated Germany's offer of a comprehensive alliance, point two demanded Danzig and the corridor for Germany, while Gdynia was to remain Polish, but would receive a corridor in return, and a Polish free port was to be established in Danzig, point three offered a guarantee of the new Polish borders, point four repeated the colonial demands indicated to Henderson the previous day, point 5 demanded guarantees for the German minorities remaining in Poland, and point 6 finally repeated the declaration that Germany was committed to protecting the Empire with the Wehrmacht.(39)

Dahlerus presented these proposals in London at noon on August 27. Chamberlain, Halifax, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Alexander Cadogan, received him and were somewhat irritated by the content of his message, initially even doubting the authenticity of the text. After Dahlerus had convinced the British of the substance of his message, it was decided to send him to Berlin with a statement to test the mood. Only later would Ambassador Henderson deliver the official response. What Dahlerus brought back from London on the evening of August 27, 1939, seemed at first glance to ease the crisis. The British government accepted the desire for a general agreement with Germany (point 1) and merely rejected the German guarantee for the Empire (point 6) politely but firmly. It was said to be incompatible with the reputation and interests of the British Empire. How this related to the fact that Poland had just been officially recognized as a guarantor of British sovereignty remained unsaid. Germany had no claim to colonies, but this could be negotiated once the situation had eased (point 4). A German guarantee of the new (sic) Polish borders was not sufficient and should be replaced by an international guarantee (Great Britain, France, Italy, Soviet Union, Germany) (point 3). The exact arrangements regarding the Danzig/Corridor question and the minorities (points 2 and 5) were to be negotiated between Poland and Germany.

---

39 See *Dahlerus*, Versuch, p. 69 ff.

Hitler accepted this offer immediately, not "surprisingly," as has occasionally been written,[40]but rather completely logically under the circumstances and in line with his policy of recent months. He also accommodated what was supposedly Britain's most urgent request and agreed to direct Polish-German negotiations. In the next few days, it would become clear who would be responsible for the failure of a negotiated solution. In any case, he wanted to make it as clear as possible that he was not to blame for its failure. For the time being, Dahlerus conveyed Germany's agreement to London, giving Henderson the green light to deliver an official response from the British government to the same effect. This put the buck in London's court. At 2 p.m. on August 28, Halifax therefore requested the British ambassador in Warsaw, Sir Howard Kennard, to bring a corresponding declaration from Poland. Foreign Minister Beck did indeed agree that "the Reich government should be notified that Poland was ready for negotiations."([41])However, to be on the safe side, [he]reserved the right to clarify the meaning of the term "international guarantee" before such negotiations began. This bought some time. Henderson was thus able to convey England's official response and Poland's formal willingness to negotiate on the evening of August 28. Hitler and Ribbentrop received him at 10:30 p.m. There were a number of strange things about this response. The text began with a slight affront by ignoring Hitler's ideas, which Dahlerus had presented in London the day before. Instead, it titled itself: "Response of His Majesty's Government of August 28 to the communications of the German Chancellor of August 23 and
August 25, 1939."[42]

The communiqué then carefully avoided any tangible content. It had to be established "in advance" that "any agreement reached would be guaranteed by other powers." There was no mention of who these powers might be, except that England had assured its participation, or what the guarantee would look like. Safeguarding the "indispensable interests of Poland" was another basis for the negotiations, but there was no mention of the scope of these interests, even though the British government had described the scope of these interests in detail three days earlier in the secret agreement. And so it went on: no mention of Hitler's demands for colonies, no mention of his
The Empire's "guarantee" was merely a vague promise of German-British talks—as soon as possible—and an equally vague statement about their possible content: this requires a more precise description.

This was obviously inadequate, and Henderson must have noticed this himself, because he hastily added "certain remarks," as he himself called them in his report to London, or "explained the individual points once again

---

[40] Cf. *Hofer*, Entfesselung, p. 313.
[41] White Paper of the Polish Government, Doc. 96.
[42] Blue Book of the British Government, Doc. 64.

verbally, without adding anything substantially new to the content," as noted in the German report of the conversation.[43] In any case, the dialogue petered out in disputes about Blücher's role at Waterloo, England's "loyalty," Chamberlain's political strength, Henderson's private opinion on the cause of the Polish majority in the Corridor that had emerged since 1919, and much more. Hitler, once again disillusioned with British politics after this encounter, emphasized "that he was not bluffing," as Henderson reported to London. In response, Henderson could think of nothing better than to assure him "that we were not playing a comedy either."(44) It may have been at this point that Ribbentrop had to intervene to calm things down, as Henderson banged his hand on the table in a very undiplomatic manner and Hitler wanted to throw him out as a result. After Hitler made another attempt toward the end to get specific and asked Henderson directly about a German-British alliance, without learning anything new ("not ruled out"), and brought up the colonial question with the same result ("concessions are easier to make in a good atmosphere than in a bad one"(47)), he evaded further questions from Henderson and promised a formal response, including on the question of German-Polish negotiations for the next day.

The war of nerves entered its next phase. Germany's specific demands regarding Danzig and the settlement of the corridor issue now had to be formulated in such a way that the international public could not interpret them as an attempt to provoke a war. At the same time, they had to contain a general component that reflected the continued desire for good relations with the British Empire and the international situation. The two states that Hitler and Ribbentrop suspected of intending to attack Germany were to be deprived of their pretext, but also of their opportunity. In the diary of Abwehr officer Helmuth Groscurth, there is a third-hand account of Hitler's remarks, which the editors link to these considerations: He would come up with something for the Poles that would kill them. It was to be an offer that could not be officially rejected. After a single, general statement on German-English relations, the text finally handed over to Henderson contained a brief overview of Germany's efforts to negotiate with Poland since the fall of 1938, accompanied by a general lament about the "unbearable conditions" on the German-Polish border and the injustice of Versailles. Hitler and Ribbentrop simultaneously accepted the British demand for an international guarantee of the Polish border, but emphatically brought the Soviet Union into play, since the Reich government "in the event of a new settlement

---

43 ADAP, Series D, Vol. VII, Doc. 384.

44 Blue Book, Doc. 76.

45 According to *Ribbentrop* in a postwar recording, here cited in *Krywalski*, Transcripts, p. 737.

46 Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 75.

47 Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 76.

territorial conditions in Poland, it would no longer be in a position to commit to guarantees or participate in guarantees without the involvement of the Soviet Union."[48]He could well imagine what borders Stalin would have in mind. This reference can be read as a renewed attempt, following the foreseeable failure of the Polish-German negotiations due to Polish resistance, to bring about an international conference on Poland, the results of which were already prejudiced by the secret protocol of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact. In the midst of these Anglo-German negotiations, Ribbentrop received the Russian chargé d'affaires Ivanov on August 29 and informed him of Germany's willingness to negotiate with Poland. He also conveyed a message from Hitler,

> "No more conflict with Russia. An unconditional, radical, definitive long-term pact with Russia. Germany would not attend any international conference without Russia."(49)

The German Reich Government declared to the British Government that "under these circumstances, it therefore agreed to accept the proposed mediation of the Royal British Government to send a Polish personality with full powers to Berlin. It expects this personality to arrive on Wednesday, August 30, 1939."[50]When Henderson suggested that "this sentence looks like an ultimatum,"(51) "after a few heated remarks, Mr. Hitler and Mr. von Ribbentrop both assured me that the sole purpose was to emphasize the urgency of the moment."(52)

The British government had now achieved what it had set out to do: direct German-Polish negotiations had been agreed to by the German side (including the date, location, and subject matter of the negotiations) and could lead to a de-escalation of the situation. However, it soon became apparent that Henderson had been dealing in lemons: since the Polish government did not want them and the secret agreement signed with England had undermined these negotiations, they would not take place. The London government also contributed to the fact that there would be no negotiations, as Foreign Minister Halifax decided that the German demand for talks with a Polish representative would not be communicated to Warsaw at all. Neville Henderson was obviously tired of this alibi diplomacy himself and, at this meeting on August 29, his last encounter with Hitler, he allowed himself a strange provocation: following a decision made before the conversation, he yelled at the tyrant at an apparently appropriate moment – the

---

48 Cf. ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 421, p. 346.
49 Quoted from *Groscurth*, Diary, p. 192, August 29, 1939.
50 See ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 421, p. 347.
51 See Blue Book, Doc. 79.
52 Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 79.

The occasion chosen was Hitler's complaint about the lack of British sympathy for Germans killed in Poland – and, according to his own statement, he then wanted to leave. He wrote to Halifax:

> "Not only did I fulfill a long-cherished wish, but I did so after careful consideration that it would be a good thing. I must add that I got up to leave after the worst, but he (Hitler) did not react"[53]

Ribbentrop later claimed to have saved the situation once again with a few distracting words, as Hitler would otherwise have thrown the British out for good without waiting for him to leave.[54] Although this scene never became as famous as Henderson's and Lipski's alleged hearing impairments and their sudden lack of German language skills barely twenty-four hours later, it belongs in the same category. Reading Henderson's statement, it was already his intention before the conversation to cause a final scandal after which no further debates would be possible. There had never been an ambassador who shouted down the head of state of the country assigned to him, then left and came back. A return of this ambassador was out of the question in this case. Instead of the legend of the incomprehensible 16 points of the fast-talking Ribbentrop, Henderson would then have had to give an imaginative account of Hitler's behavior, which would have forced a diplomat like him, committed to the dignity of the British Empire, to leave the room and break off negotiations. In "Failure of a Mission," this option is indeed hinted at when Henderson mentions his "heated response," since Hitler had launched an "undeserved attack on the humanity of the English government" with his remark about the Germans who had been killed.[55]The fact that this heated response was a planned and deliberate response that was merely looking for a pretext was concealed from the international readership. Ribbentrop had prevented the breakdown this time. However, the war of nerves over the "alibi," which Henderson, according to some witnesses, was struggling with during those days, continued with Ribbentrop's intervention in the old cast.

There was also a third party involved. Regardless of the quarrels, on the evening of August 29, Henderson reported the German offer of direct negotiations not only to London, but also to his Polish colleague Lipski. According to Henderson, Poland should appoint a representative as soon as possible. Foreign Minister Beck, for his part, was by no means inclined to do so. It was therefore fortunate that the Polish government did not yet have to know officially about Germany's willingness to negotiate, because this naturally required an official communication from London, not a private conversation between ambassadors. Since this communication did not come, Warsaw had time. If London

---

[53] DBFP, VII, No. 565, *Henderson* to *Halifax*, August 30, 1939.
[54] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 191.
[55] Cf. *Henderson*, Failure, p. 306.
[56] *Hofer*, Unleashing, p. 335; DBFP, VII, No. 510, 537; *Henderson*, Failure, p. 267.

There was still time to react. But nothing came from London. Several telegrams were exchanged between the government and the British ambassadors in Warsaw and Berlin, but the Polish government did not officially learn of the German response and its content, which was so urgent that it was later exaggerated in London as a veiled ultimatum, until August 31,
"to put it bluntly, 25 minutes after the German ultimatum, if it was one, had expired."(57)

Around this time, Henderson was sent to deliver the bad news to the Germans that no Polish representative would be coming that day. When he met with Ribbentrop shortly after midnight, the Polish government still had no official knowledge of this offer. Foreign Minister Halifax had refused to pass on this information about the German request for contact to Warsaw at all, stating that the Germans had a Polish ambassador in Berlin available for negotiations.[58] However, he had also refused to pass this message on to the ambassador, and he had ultimately refused to communicate his fundamental rejection to the German government. Instead, Henderson spread a grotesque story in Berlin about alleged technical difficulties that would prevent the arrival of a Polish ambassador. No one could believe it; it seemed more likely to reinforce Ribbentrop's mistrust of British motives and statements.

The mood was understandably tense, and we now come to the scene already mentioned, which Ernst von Weizsäcker described in his own way in his papers. The lack of a swift response to the German note of the previous day had awakened in Ribbentrop all his suspicions about the true motives behind British policy. When Henderson began to read out the vague wording of the British response, he lost his temper. Henderson had difficulty reading out his text, which in fact contained nothing new. The concrete German demands, which had already been presented several times by Hitler and Dahlerus, were not wanted to be heard: The British government

> "believes that the German government is currently working on proposals for a solution. These proposals will undoubtedly be examined most carefully during the exchange of views. It can then be decided to what extent they are compatible with the essential conditions announced by His Majesty's Government, which the German Government has expressed its willingness to accept in principle."(59)

---

57 Cf. *Taylor*, Origins, p. 313.
58 Cf. *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 277, and DBFP 3/VII, Doc. 538.
59 Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 89.

Great Britain then withdrew somewhat from its mediating role and urged direct German-Polish contact:

> "The manner of establishing contact and the preparations for an exchange of views must obviously be agreed upon in all haste between the German and British governments."

The delicate and crucial questions of the time, place, and content of such negotiations, which had been pondered all day in London, remained unanswered, but at least a half-hearted comment was added as to why this day had passed without incident:

> "His Majesty's Government is of the opinion, however, that it would be impracticable to establish this feeling today (meaning August 30, author's note)."[60]

The British response had been formulated with Poland in mind, and almost simultaneously with Henderson's visit to Ribbentrop, Kennard forwarded an identical text to the Polish government in Warsaw, to which the German note of August 29 was also attached. At 0.25 a.m. on August 31, Warsaw now knew officially that it should have sent a plenipotentiary to Berlin yesterday. Henderson later stated that he was aware of this slight but significant delay and saw it as one of the reasons for Ribbentrop's agitation.[61] The British government did not ask for understanding for the delay and merely referred to the "Reservation" against the demand for immediate direct negotiations, which had been made known in Berlin. Henderson finally added another reason for possible agitation verbally. He claimed that the British government had evidence of German acts of sabotage in Poland, and Ribbentrop actually lost his temper. They shouted at each other. "The least that will happen now, I thought to myself, is that the Reich Foreign Minister will throw His British Majesty's ambassador out the door," interpreter Schmidt later recalled.[62] But Ribbentrop ultimately kept his nerve this time as well. He still had a trump card to play, to which his British opponent and the entire opposing party could only respond with silence and denial, as it turned out. Henderson had to stay.

---

60 Quoted from Blue Book, Doc. 89.

61 Cf. *Henderson*, Mission, p. 312 f.

62 Cf. *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 458.

2. Diplomatic hearing impairments

> Beck's role was secondary. He rightly concluded that politics were being made in London and not in Paris, and therefore did not commit himself to an anti-German stance until the decision was made in London. ... But what did Beck do, when all is said and done? He sold Polish policy to England. Reading the Polish and English White and Blue Books, it is clear that it was the English, not Beck, who directed our entire endgame with Hitler in the summer of 1939. What else could have been done? Go against Russia with Hitler? That was only possible with the blessing of the British and French; otherwise, the Polish people would never have agreed to it, and the events in Yugoslavia confirm once again what fate would have awaited Beck.
>
> Krzysztof Nienaski[63]

Ribbentrop now, Henderson later claimed, "pulled out a lengthy document, which he read aloud in German at top speed."(64) It was a variation on the German proposals that Dahlerus had presented in London barely fourteen hours earlier. They were now divided into 16 points and, with regard to the corridor, contained only more precise details on the modalities of the required vote. The basic idea (Danzig to Germany, Gdynia to Poland, and "a corridor through the corridor for the defeated party") had not changed. A telegram to the chargé d'affaires of the German embassy in London had already sent the sixteen proposals on
August 28 (!) to England as "strictly confidential and not to be disclosed to anyone."[65]

The vote was not to take place before the end of one year (point 5) and was to be carried out by an international commission to be formed by France, Italy, England, and the USSR (point 3). For this period, it would exercise all sovereign rights, prepare for the vote, and, for this purpose, arrange for the evacuation of the aforementioned territory by Polish authorities and military. Mutual compensation payments for expropriations and
"Other damage to the minorities on both sides" since 1918 was envisaged (point 13). This meant that the German proposals had already been formulated three days before they were read out by Henderson in the early morning of August 31. When the official news reached London on August 29 that the German government was preparing proposals and wanted to present them to a Polish representative who was to arrive on August 30, these proposals were already

---

[63] Quoted from *Nienaski*, Mackiewicz, p. 11. With the "events in Yugoslavia," the author is referring to the coup d'état in Belgrade shortly after the signing of the German-Yugoslav treaty, which had taken place only a few weeks earlier when he wrote his article, published in early May 1941.

[64] Cf. Blue Book, Doc. 92 and *Henderson*, Mission, p. 312.

[65] See PA AA R 28882, pp. 78808–78813.

in the draft. The message of August 29 also mentioned "in accordance with its obligations" that the Reich government

> "in the event of a reorganization of the territorial situation in Poland, would no longer be in a position to commit itself to guarantees or participate in guarantees without the involvement of the Soviet Union"[66]

This was a fairly direct admission that Germany was committed to the USSR and, just as directly, that the USSR must also have been committed.

Ribbentrop's speech, delivered barely more than 24 hours before the fighting began, marked the start of the final phase of political maneuvering before the outbreak of war. The willingness to negotiate had been declared, Germany's demands were now laid out on the table in precise terms, and all that was missing, in principle, was the Polish representative to accept them. Ribbentrop indicated that he would hand the paper to the Polish ambassador when Lipski arrived. However, he refused to pass it on to Henderson or to call the Polish ambassador himself.[67]The British government had agreed to bring in a Polish negotiating partner, and now, in Ribbentrop's view, it should do so. Henderson did indeed agree to call Lipski and did so a little later in the early hours of the morning, without conveying anything to Lipski. While Henderson had just announced in the British reply note that it had been technically impossible to bring a Polish representative to the German Foreign Ministry within 24 hours on August 30 to accept the negotiation proposals, this was now suddenly no longer a problem. It should be possible 90 minutes after the conversation with Ribbentrop. In fact, a phone call to the Polish embassy or a telegram from Warsaw could have easily obtained Lipski's authorization to accept proposals. The simple reason that no one came to the German Foreign Ministry was that no one wanted to come. The 16 points had now had their effect. The refusal to negotiate on this basis settled the question of war guilt for the coming conflict in favor of the German government—if the public were to learn of it. As it turned out, however, the British government succeeded in essentially preventing publication in the West or in portraying it as a sham offer. In addition to keeping this point quiet, a special maneuver was used to achieve this.

The very next morning, Henderson emphasized that he had allegedly not understood the content of Ribbentrop's speech. This gave rise to one of the widespread legends surrounding the events shortly before the outbreak of war. Ribbentrop had read out the 16-point plan too quickly for Henderson to understand it.

---

[66] See PA AA R 28882, p. 78849, p. 9 of the letter to the British government dated August 29.

[67] See Blue Book, Doc. 92.

could have understood. This assertion has been adopted by large sections of historiography. It is obviously inaccurate for the reason stated: Henderson correctly passed on the plan barely an hour later, as can be seen from the British Blue Book itself.[68] He also had a conversation lasting more than an hour about these points with his Polish ambassador colleague Lipski during the night, as First Secretary Henryk Malhomme later recalled. [69] The Polish ambassador then passed on the four key points of the plan to Warsaw late in the morning.[70] The interpreter Schmidt, who was present, correctly writes in his memoirs that Ribbentrop read to Henderson at a normal pace and even "provided explanations on some points."[(71)] Ribbentrop himself emphasized this once again when Henderson came to see him on September 2 with the demand for the withdrawal of German troops from Poland and claimed several times that he had not understood anything:

> "The RAM pointed out that he had read the document slowly and clearly and that he had even made verbal explanations on the main points (Danzig, voting in the corridor, protection of minorities). He was not authorized to hand him the document and therefore read it aloud in the hope that at least the next day the Polish side would respond to it."[72]

In fact, the German government had to expect that a Polish representative would come to the Foreign Ministry and accept proposals that amounted to preserving the status quo of the current Polish state. If this was an attempt to start a war to conquer Poland, then it was completely inappropriate, unless Poland also wanted this war. Meanwhile, despite his telephone conversation with Lipski and the report to London, Henderson began to spread the story that he had misunderstood Ribbentrop. This line of communication had apparently been agreed upon at the British embassy after Lipski's dismissive reaction. This was a problem that was solved with a telephone call, in which the Swedish negotiator Dahlerus repeated the sixteen points to the

---

[68] Cf. *Henderson*, Mission, p. 272 f., Blue Book, Doc. 92, *Dahlerus*, Versuch, p. 115, and my account of the events in: *Scheil*, Logik, p. 212 ff.

[69] Cf. *Lipski*, Diplomat, p. 569. *Henderson* called *Lipski* at around two o'clock, who drove to the British Embassy and did not return until around four o'clock. *Lipski* mentions the incident in his own lengthy account, which was first published in 1947. After *Lipski* rejected the German proposals, the British ambassador summoned Secretary *Malhomme,* whom he had known for years, to his office on the morning of August 31, 1939, and implored him that he was not "unfriendly" toward Poland, but only wanted to resolve the German-Polish conflict without violence. See *Lipski,* Diplomat, p. 606.

[70] He also had all 16 points brought to the embassy in writing that same morning. See *Lipski,* Diplomat, p. 571, and *Scheil,* Logik, p. 212 ff. The four key points were: Danzig to Germany, Gdynia to Poland, a referendum in the Corridor, and international supervision of the vote by England, France, Italy, and Russia.

[71] Cf. *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 459 f.

[72] Quoted from ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 513, p. 411, conversation *between Ribbentrop and Henderson* at 9 p.m. on September 2, 1939.

Britain. Now it was suddenly George Ogilvie-Forbes' turn to doubt his German language skills: "Although Forbes had a good command of German, he asked me to read more slowly," Dahlerus wondered. The next morning, Hermann Göring finally asked Dahlerus to go to the British Embassy to make sure that the 16 points had arrived there correctly. He gave them to him again in writing.

At 10 a.m. on August 31, 1939, Dahlerus met with Henderson, who told him once again "that he had understood only three words." He then compared the paper Dahlerus had brought with him with Forbes' notes from the previous night. They were reasonably consistent, and in fact Henderson had already sent a fairly accurate summary to London at 9:30 a.m. (one that explicitly reflected his memory of Ribbentrop's speech and made no reference to Dahlerus's call). Now Dahlerus found him in a gloomy mood, and even the arrival of the supposedly eagerly awaited written version of the 16 points could not improve his mood. Henderson rejected Dahlerus' suggestion that they take the paper with the 16 points to the Polish embassy together. Dahlerus should go alone, he said, and he would not be dissuaded even when the Swede pointed out that he had never met Lipski and was therefore unsuitable to conduct such confidential and urgent negotiations with Poland. Henderson merely telephoned the Polish embassy, announced Dahlerus's arrival, and sent Forbes along with him for reinforcement.

The two arrived at 11 a.m. to find the embassy already in disarray. Even in Lipski's conference room, where the ambassador was waiting for them, some of the furniture was already missing. Dahlerus began to read the German note to Poland, but now it was Lipski who suddenly could no longer understand German. He "soon declared that he could not understand the content."[73] Ogilvie-Forbes tried a different approach, "writing down the main points by hand and handing the notes to Lipski, who took the paper with trembling hands and looked at it for a while, but then declared that he could not interpret what was written there." (74) So that didn't work either. Probably to put an end to the farce, Dahlerus suggested "dictating the note immediately to his (Lipski's, author's note) secretary." He went with her into an adjoining room and dictated directly into the typewriter. "I returned with the transcript and handed it to Lipski, whereupon Forbes and I took our leave after exchanging a few polite remarks."(75)

During the dictation, Forbes had spoken with Lipski and learned more about the background to his sudden language difficulties. According to Forbes, Lipski had said "that he had no reason whatsoever to be interested in notes or offers from the German side. He was familiar with the situation in Germany based on his

---

73 *Dahlerus*, Versuch, 1948, p. 110.
74 Ibid., p. 110.
75 Ibid., p. 110.

five and a half years as ambassador and had close ties to Göring and others in influential circles; he said he was convinced that in the event of war, unrest would break out in this country and Polish troops would march successfully against Berlin."[76]Poland was therefore prepared to risk a military confrontation, based not least on misleading assumptions about the internal weakness of the Nazi regime, as promoted by the internal German conspiracy. Lipski's proposal continued to occupy the German head of state two years later:

> "The general opinion was that Germany would collapse immediately. The Polish ambassador Lipski wrote in a report that he knew from official sources with whom he was in contact that Germany would collapse within eight days."(77)

It was only logical that a few hours later, German intelligence decoded a telegram from Warsaw instructing Lipski once again in this vein:

> "Under no circumstances should you engage in factual discussions; if the Reich government makes written proposals, you must explain that you have no authority whatsoever to accept or discuss such proposals, and that you are only to convey the above message from your government and seek further instructions."(78)

This passage might have been lost after the war if Göring had not personally copied the text and immediately handed it to Dahlerus. But basically, it was nothing more than what Lipski had already explained to Forbes in private. From the Polish point of view, it was not a matter of negotiations aimed at easing the situation. Even now, Lipski could have stopped talking about his hearing loss and gone to the German Foreign Ministry to have the sixteen points officially presented to him once again. Nothing about it was impossible or incompatible with vital Polish interests, at least those that had been publicly communicated. Lipski had the whole of August 31, 1939, to look at the proposal. But when he actually met with Ribbentrop in the early evening, he did as he had been instructed and stated succinctly that he had no authority to accept proposals. That was not what the Polish side had promised British diplomacy. To be on the safe side, Foreign Minister Beck therefore personally picked up the phone and lied to Ambassador Kennard, claiming that Lipski had assured Ribbentrop of Poland's willingness to enter into direct negotiations. (80) This was consistent. Beck had guarantee powers for a Polish

---

76 Ibid., p. 110.

77 *Hitler* in one of his table talks, quoted in *Jochmann*, Monologues, p. 253, entry dated January 2, 1942.

78 *Dahlerus*, Versuch, p. 113.

79 Cf. ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 476, p. 386.

80 Cf. BDFA, II, F, Vol. 58, Doc. 329, p. 320, *Kennard* to *Halifax* on September 1, 1939.

Politicians were concerned about an aggressive resolution of the supposedly inevitable German-Polish conflict, protected from behind by Poland's non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and supported in the West by the offensive alliance with England and France. In Warsaw, there was no thought of allowing negotiations to spoil this uniquely favorable situation, which Beck had been working toward since the end of 1932, or of giving the still-hesitant elements of British diplomacy the opportunity to back out.

Meanwhile, the less hesitant figures in London eagerly spread the legend that Ribbentrop's slowly delivered sixteen points had been acoustically incomprehensible and had never been presented to the Polish government. Duff Cooper and Winston Churchill personally called the editorial offices of major English newspapers[81] to urge them to report on these points or to prevent any presentation of the German position altogether. The Focus network, in the form of Kingsley Martin's magazine New Statesman and Nation, spread the legend of Ribbentrop the fast talker in its September 9, 1939, issue. Instead of reporting truthfully that the 16 points had been delivered to the Polish ambassador's embassy on the morning of August 31, it claimed that he had tried in vain to pick them up at the German Foreign Ministry at that time. ([82])The BBC reported this on September 1, and the Allies' first major war lie was born.[83]Among its victims was Bert Brecht:

> "Already in the evening, the question of war guilt is raised on English radio. The Germans hear (before the Iron Curtain comes down) that Hitler's 'surprisingly generous proposals' were not presented at all."([84])

But legally speaking, there was still no state of war. Hitler had ordered the attack for September 1, 1939, without declaring war, because the hostilities were initially intended to provide a framework for further political maneuvers against Great Britain. Ribbentrop attempted another shift in this direction on September 2, 1939. On that day, at Hitler's instruction, JvR telephoned the London embassy at 8 p.m.([85])Ribbentrop commissioned Fritz Hesse, a personal acquaintance and press advisor to the embassy, with the urgent task of contacting Sir Horace Wilson, the British Special Minister in the German-Czech conflict the previous year and closest confidant of

---

81 See *Cooper*, Diaries, September 1, 1939.

82 See New Statesman and Nation, Vol. XVIII, No. 446, p. 362 f., and CHAR 2/389 B.

83 The Focus network, in the form of *Kingsley Martin's* magazine New Statesman and Nation, published them in its September 9, 1939, issue. Instead of reporting truthfully that the 16 points had been added to the Polish ambassador's own embassy on the morning of August 31, it stated that he had tried in vain to pick them up from the German Foreign Ministry at that time. See New Statesman and Nation, Vol. XVIII, No. 446,
p. 362 f., or CHAR 2/389 B.

84 Quoted from *Brecht*, Arbeitsjournal, I, p. 59, September 1, 1939.

85 Cf. *Martin*, Friedensinitiativen, p. 45.

Neville Chamberlain's advisor, [86] in order to signal a conciliatory gesture to the British government. A year earlier, during the Sudeten crisis, Hesse and Wilson had also spoken several times about possible solutions and potential misunderstandings at Wilson's meeting with Hitler.Such informal clarifications were also a regular part of Wilson's duties in other cases, as he "had his office in a small anteroom to the Prime Minister's, and all visitors to the Prime Minister had to pass Sir Horace and chat with him briefly."This had proven effective in the previous year, and as Hesse noted following the Sudeten crisis on October 11, 1938, his English interlocutors were also of the opinion that in the event of a new crisis, direct contact between the German leadership and Chamberlain must be established, while the Foreign Office should be bypassed.[89]Now, in September 1939, Hesse again sought access to Chamberlain via Wilson. Ribbentrop had instructed him to hold out the prospect of a German troop withdrawal from Poland and to invite his counterpart to Berlin for detailed negotiations.

> "Go to your representative immediately.....and explain the following to him: The Führer is prepared to withdraw from Poland and offer compensation for the damage already done, on condition that we receive Danzig and the road through the corridor, if England takes over mediation in the German-Polish conflict. You are authorized by the Führer to submit this proposal to the English cabinet and to commence negotiations on this matter immediately. Emphasize once again
> that you are acting on Hitler's express instructions and that this is not a private initiative on my part, so that there can be no misunderstanding in this matter."[90]

Ribbentrop and Hitler's proposal, delivered by von Hesse, took up an English demand of September 1, 1939. The British government threatened to "fulfill its obligations to Poland without hesitation if it did not receive satisfactory assurances from the German government that the German government would cease all aggressive actions against Poland and was prepared to withdraw its armed forces from Polish territory immediately."([91])Gdańsk was not mentioned at all, not even indirectly, because it was not part of Polish territory. On September 2,

---

[86] *R. A. Butler*, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, even described Wilson in a private letter as the secret ruler of England. See *Lukacs*, Tage, p. 61.

[87] Cf. *Hesse's* notes on the conversation in: BA-KO NL Hesse, Kle 276–1, p. 223 ff. from October 5 and 6, 1938.

[88] According to *Kenneth Clark*, a writer who was friends with *Chamberlain*, in his memoirs. Quoted in
n. *Lukacs*, Tage, p. 61.

[89] Cf. BA-KO, NL Hesse, Kle 276–1, p. 237 f., October 11, 1938, transcript of *Hesse's* conversation with an unnamed "confidant" of Chamberlain, probably *George Steward*, as reported by Ambassador *Dirksen* from London on October 12. See ADAP, IV, Doc. 251, p. 265.

[90] *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 210 f.

[91] Quoted from ADAP, VII, Doc. 560, p. 441, ultimatum of September 3, 1939. The wording regarding the withdrawal from Poland is identical to that of the English note of September 1, 1939. See ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 513, p. 410, September 1, 1939.

This was followed by a statement by Neville Chamberlain before Parliament. If German forces were withdrawn from Polish territory, the British government would "regard the situation as the same as before the border was crossed."[92] When Ribbentrop, acting on Hitler's behalf, instructed Hesse to offer London an immediate withdrawal from Polish territory but to claim Danzig for Germany, the response from London was essentially a repetition of this demand. However, the response given to Hesse there was fundamentally negative. Hesse was kept waiting in the Prime Minister's anteroom, where Wilson explained to him that a British declaration of war was now inevitable. The British government wanted – in line with the 16-point plan – to have "heard nothing" of Hesse's attempt the very next day. The ultimatum to Germany on September 3 claimed that "no response had been received" since September 1.[93]

The offer of withdrawal made by an official German negotiator in the chambers of the British Prime Minister was a response that could not be ignored. If its very existence was now being denied, further contacts made little sense, especially since Wilson had told Hesse that Britain's entry into the war was a foregone conclusion based on fundamental considerations. The talks on the night of September 2 to 3 therefore marked the end, for the time being, of direct contact between the four European great powers with the aim of reaching a conference settlement *before* an official state of war, for the armed conflict was now two days old and could no longer be ignored. The political disputes were soon resumed, but under different conditions, which will be discussed shortly.

3. The alibi – a summary

> "They let us pass, they let us pass through the risk zone unhindered, and we were able to navigate all the dangerous cliffs, and when we were ready, well equipped, better than them, they started the war."
>
> Joseph Goebbels[94]

The morning after Hesse's appearance in London, the British ambassador announced his arrival in Berlin. Henderson finally made his long-awaited final appearance and delivered his government's ultimatum, as mentioned above. He now demanded, once again, that German troops withdraw completely from Poland within two hours, as had been offered the previous evening. In view of the events described above

---

[92] Cf. *Henderson*, Mission, p. 326.

[93] Quoted from ADAP, VII, Doc. 560, p. 441, ultimatum of September 3, 1939. *Henderson* also stated: "The German government remained silent." See *Henderson*, Mission, p. 326.

[94] *Goebbels* in a speech to German press representatives on April 5, 1940. Quoted in *Hillgruber*, Strategie, p. 14.

The events surrounding Hesse's appearance in London actually constituted a declaration of war. The war was a foregone conclusion, as Wilson had emphasized to Hesse the evening before. The "ultimatum" was therefore not a feasible demand, but served as another alibi to the British public, which was thus presented with an unreasonable and uncompromising German government.

The reactions of Hitler and especially Ribbentrop to the presentation of the ultimatum have left a lasting impression in memoirs. Numerous people who were present, such as State Secretary Weizsäcker, interpreter Schmidt, and Franz von Sonnleithner, claim to have observed a "surprise" at this English move, both on the part of Hitler and Ribbentrop, and, in addition, Ribbentrop's embarrassment at his alleged misjudgment of English passivity. Sonnleithner, as mentioned, places this impression on "September 1 or 2," when he allegedly conveyed a message from England to the trio of Hitler, Göring, and Ribbentrop, who happened to be standing together, about the certain development toward war there.

This interpretation can also be relegated to the realm of legends and misinterpretations, which arise when contemporary witnesses and historians seek only confirmation of their own assumptions in unfamiliar faces. As explained in detail above, Ribbentrop had been expecting a possible English war against Germany for more than a year and a half and tried to prevent it through a policy of deterrence. When he actually held the English declaration of war in his hands, it was long-awaited and feared bad news, which he received with consternation for understandable reasons. It represented a failure of the policies of 1938/39, which may also have prompted Hitler to react with restrained anger, as interpreter Schmidt describes the scene, not without linking it to his own speculations about what had preceded it:

> "I then slowly translated the British government's ultimatum to him (i.e., Hitler, author's note). When I had finished, there was complete silence, just as there had been after the bombshell in Godesberg that night. Hitler sat there frozen, staring ahead. He was not stunned, as was later claimed, nor was he raging, as others wanted to believe. He sat completely still and motionless in his seat. After a while, which seemed like an eternity to me, he turned to Ribbentrop, who had remained frozen at the window. "What now?" Hitler asked his foreign minister with an angry look in his eyes, as if to express that Ribbentrop had misinformed him about the British reaction."([96])

Hitler certainly did not want to express this, since Ribbentrop's predictions had been fulfilled with the ultimatum, as we have seen. In this respect, the observations may even be correct on the surface, but they misjudge...

---

[95] Cf. *Sonnleithner*, Diplomat, p. 13 f.

[96] Quoted in *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 464.

the background to the events. What can be found in almost every school textbook today[97] is proof that the outbreak of war, after maneuvers such as the German-Russian non-aggression pact and the
September 2, 1939, in London, was ultimately seen in Berlin as a disaster that had finally come to pass. "What now?" was a legitimate question, because Germany's foreign policy options had been largely exhausted by September 3, 1939, and its military and defense industry potential was questionable at best compared to that of its enemies. Further offers of negotiation or compromise made to the large, influential states of European politics over the next year and a half were also doomed to fail due to these circumstances.

But who ultimately "won" in this deceptive dispute between the future warring parties over who the public and historians would ultimately blame for the war? In his memoirs, Albert Speer claims that Hitler told him in August 1939 that he would draft the documents for the final negotiations himself this time, so that the right impression would be made:

> "This time, the mistake of 1914 will be avoided. Everything now depends on shifting the blame to the other side. In 1914, this was done in a botched manner. Once again, the drafts from the Foreign Office are simply unusable. It is best if I write the notes myself"[98]

Speer claims not to have been impressed by the results of these efforts, which he says he only examined while in custody in Nuremberg. Others were involuntarily very impressed. Among them was Winston Churchill, who, together with Duff Cooper, specifically called the major British newspapers to prevent the publication of Hitler's notes or at least to ensure that they would be commented on in a decidedly negative manner. There were good reasons for this. Any British newspaper reader would have immediately realized from uncommented and objective reporting that the wording from the German decision-makers was not suitable for forcing a war. What Ribbentrop, for example, had slowly and clearly read out to Henderson as a sixteen-point plan had been worked out by him and Hitler together and could serve as a basis for further negotiations, as the ambassador himself knew very well. ([99])A world public informed of this would have wondered whether, under these circumstances,

---

[97] Cf. *Schmidt*, Außenpolitik, p. 359.

[98] Quoted from *Speer*, Memoirs, p. 179.

[99] Significantly, the editors of Groscurth's diary suggest that *Hitler's* statement, as recorded by *Groscurth*, that he would come up with something that would "choke the Poles" referred to this 16-point negotiation plan. See *Groscurth*, Tagebücher, August 27, 1939.

was really necessary to wage a war to prevent an internationally supervised referendum in the "Corridor" or to die "for Danzig."

On the other hand, there were several reasons why these negotiation proposals could also have been publicly rejected. Even "moderate demands" were still *demands,* demands for the possessions or interests of the Republic of Poland that had been preserved until then. No one could believe anymore that these were "final demands," which were in fact the only consideration offered in return, because too often new demands had been added after the loudly proclaimed "final demands" in the Sudetenland and elsewhere. The ethnic justification for why Danzig, which was inhabited almost exclusively by Germans, had to become part of the German state was no longer a strong argument since the occupation of Prague. "If Mr. Hitler wants to enter Danzig, he must leave Prague," became the catchphrase of late summer 1939. ([100]) In this respect, this negotiating position weighed heavily on the German side; it was they who questioned the status quo with arguments that they themselves had not recognized shortly before.

Winston Churchill nevertheless made every effort to spare the world public this question and was of the opinion that history should not only be made politically, but also written by himself. After the end of the war, he had plenty of time and a large staff to implement this project. Undoubtedly, the victors write their version of history with the additional moral backing of their own success and the material superiority of the victor over the vanquished, and therefore with a greater chance of being heard than the losers, especially when the defeat is as comprehensive as it was for the German side after 1945.

A cursory glance at the research literature on the outbreak of World War II nevertheless gives the impression that the German side was actually successful in this part of the conflict. This impression arises because the details of these maneuvers immediately prior to the outbreak of war are either ignored or inaccurately presented in the research. Even more recent literature on the subject, which claims to provide a fundamental assessment of German foreign policy and the role of the Foreign Office in it, regularly fails to take into account the Foreign Office's documentation on the outbreak of war or to provide a more detailed account of the immediate pre-war diplomacy of both sides. This applies, for example, to the headline-grabbing publication Das Amt (The Office), the final report of a commission of historians appointed by the then German Foreign Minister Josef Fischer on the history of German diplomats in the Third Reich and in the Federal Republic, which was published in October 2010.

---

[100] *Carl Burckhardt,* for example, is said to have argued this point with *Hitler*. See *Burckhardt*, Mission, p. 343.

and attracted considerable attention both nationally and internationally. Although it contains a separate chapter on the Foreign Office's "Sonderkommando Künsberg,"[101] which scoured the authorities and ministries in the capitals occupied by German troops in search of incriminating material and often found it, this task is hardly mentioned in the report. Not a single confiscated document is cited, nor are the Foreign Office's file publications used or even mentioned in the bibliography.

The commission report says nothing at all about the immediate events leading up to the war. It makes only very sparse references to the broader diplomatic events in the months leading up to September 1939, scattered across a few pages of the nearly 900-page work. There, one can read freely invented claims, such as that Hitler "demanded the return of Danzig and the corridor from Poland one week after the invasion of Prague" ([102]. Of course, he did not do that. Quite apart from the fact that Danzig did not belong to Poland and therefore could hardly be "returned," recognition of the existing borders always formed the basis for the desired German-Polish settlement. Such omissions, inaccuracies, and incorrect assertions are not isolated phenomena, but run like a thread through the entire research literature on the subject. In a sense, this can hardly be otherwise, for anyone who considers all the available documents *must* conclude that the European war of 1939 neither began as an unprovoked German attack on Poland nor was necessarily provoked by the German side. From this perspective, the German side, and with it Joachim von Ribbentrop, had successfully shaped the tug-of-war over the portrayal of responsibility for the war. However, this did not change the fact that Ribbentrop's policy of deterrence had failed in this regard. Since September 3, 1939, a state of war had prevailed between the Western powers and Germany, which was actually supposed to be avoided.

---

101 Cf. *Conze*, Diplomaten, p. 214 ff.

102 See *Conze*, Diplomaten, p. 135.

IX. At the center of the war of annihilation

1. Ribbentrop vs. Chamberlain – Exchange of blows over guilt and trust

> "On the evening of the same day, I went with Nils Ehrenström, Schönfeld's Swedish colleague in the Geneva research department, to one of the big cinemas in the City of London. There was a real thriller showing: 'Confessions of a Nazi Spy'. It fitted in with the images of the day and the mood around us. Ehrenström, who speaks excellent German, whispered to me as we left the cinema: 'Let's speak English'. It dawned on me that the coming war would by no means be waged only against Hitler and his followers, but against Germany with all that it was and had. Only the extremely poor knowledge of the world among the well-meaning and dim-witted inland Germans among Hitler's critics could lead to the illusion, often cultivated throughout the war, that the world would neatly distinguish between Germany and its rulers in the war."
>
> Eugen Gerstenmaier[1]

Since September 3, 1939, a state of war had formally existed between the three-power coalition of Poland, England, and France and the German Reich. It soon became apparent that this war would not be fought only within the framework of conventional military operations and that it was not, from the outset, a dispute over German-Polish border demarcations, as had been the case in the final negotiations at the end of August. The former was already evident in the mass killings of the German-born civilian population in the Republic of Poland, in which more than five thousand ethnic German civilians of Polish nationality fell victim in the few days of war. On the Polish side, the war had begun under the auspices of a total ethnic cleansing of the country from suspected dangerous German influences. To this end, camps had been set up since the spring to gather these people. The number of deaths was correspondingly high during the deportation marches to these camps and due to arbitrary actions on site. Hitler set a secret but equally sinister precedent with his first act of war on

---

[1] Quoted from *Gerstenmaier*, Lebensbericht, p. 94. Interestingly, *Gerstenmaier* describes this mood and a comment made to him by Bishop *William Temple* about the mood of war in the English Parliament as information about English war policy that had escaped the German Foreign Minister. In fact, he never met *Ribbentrop* and apparently remained unaware of the latter's fears of an English attack throughout his life.

On the same day, he signed a decree on the killing of the mentally ill in German hospitals.

In terms of foreign policy, the war was influenced from the outset by the years between 1933 and 1938/39. Under the circumstances, all politically conceivable combinations in Europe at that time had already been played out. For Germany in 1939, which had just been declared war on, nothing less than its very existence was at stake. This was not merely an ideological question in connection with the Nazi state, but a fundamental one concerning the German nation and its foreign policy environment. The political, economic, and military leaders in Germany, including those who were not National Socialists, considered this existence within the borders of 1939 to be desirable, at least for the most part. An increasing number of political, economic, and military leaders among the war's opponents considered this existence incompatible with their own interests. This was particularly true of those in London who were determined to go to war.

Since the war, after its legal declaration by the Western powers, was not initially waged militarily by them and the fighting in Poland came to an end at the end of September, the opportunity arose for a renewed public exchange of blows between the warring parties. Duff Cooper and Winston Churchill had already made every effort to prevent the German 16-point negotiation paper from being published in the British press on September 1, and now any further German offers of a similar nature were to be either distorted in content or, better still, not mentioned at all in public. Neville Chamberlain had now, willingly or unwillingly, come to share this position, as he was genuinely afraid of a possible German peace offer at this stage, even though he did not believe in an unconditional war policy. On August 24, he had offered his resignation when, after the German-Russian non-aggression pact, it became likely that British policy would have to redeem the carte blanche issued to Poland, perhaps on unfavorable terms. However, this decision was not accepted by the royal family.[2] Chamberlain's impeccable image as a peacemaker was still needed, and the debate over who was to blame for the war continued. In addition, after the end of the Polish campaign, the international public had to be given a new explanation as to why the warring parties were neither firing at each other nor negotiating with each other.

On October 3, Chamberlain therefore opened the debate with a statement to the House of Commons that "we are not prepared to accept even the slightest assurance from the present German government."[3] As

---

[2] Cf. *Nicolson*, Diaries, p. 339.
[3] Cf. *Dahlerus*, Hitler, p. 1377.

The justification was allegedly based on broken earlier promises, for example with regard to the Munich Agreement. Although the expert opinion prepared by the Foreign Office's lawyers at the time did not provide the necessary evidence for this, who knew that? Hitler initially responded to Chamberlain's accusations on October 6 with a fundamental review of the border guarantees and non-aggression pacts given to all of Germany's neighbors over the past two years and with an explanation of why it was the Polish government's fault for seeking war despite a border guarantee that had also been given to them. Apart from a few barbs against nameless "Herostrates of human society," which were mainly aimed at Churchill,(4)he refrained from any direct attack on the British government or its prime minister. This was followed by an offer to restore a Polish state, while the German border was to be based on "historical, ethnographic, and economic conditions."[5] The conditions for such a Polish state to emerge in direct German negotiations with the Western powers had been established by Ribbentrop prior to this controversy through the German-Soviet Friendship Treaty at the end of September 1939. The text changed the course of mutual spheres of interest agreed upon in Moscow at the end of August so that all predominantly Polish-populated areas now belonged to the zone occupied by Germany. In Ribbentrop's eyes, this created "the possibility of shaping the national Polish problem according to German discretion."[6] This theoretically created the possibility of forming a Polish state with which Polish nationalism might "come to terms,"(7) and perhaps the Western powers as well.

The British Prime Minister had shown no inclination to do so. Chamberlain simply did not go into detail about the situation that had been created by the two German-Russian treaties. His speech in the House of Commons also seemed to have left this impression in Rome. Ribbentrop was able to glean this from a report by the Ribbentrop Office, which he personally took note of on October 19, as he apparently did with all news coming from this source. He described the allegedly prevailing opinion. Chamberlain and England had not specified what guarantees they wanted:

> "Why? Because this would only have revealed the long-prepared English decision to go to war. Secondly, because it would have openly revealed (especially on the question of Poland!)

---

[4]On January 30, 1942, he specifically referred to *Churchill* as "one of the most pathetic Herostratus characters in world history." See *Dahlerus,* Hitler II, p. 1827. The term goes back to the Greek *Herostratus (*Herostratos), who set fire to the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus in 356 BC just to become famous.

[5] See *Dahlerus*, Hitler, p. 1391.

[6] Cf. ADAP, D, VIII, Doc. 152, p. 125, September 28, *Ribbentrop's* telegram to the Foreign Office after the first round of negotiations with *Stalin* and *Molotov*.

[7] According to the pre-war ambassador in Warsaw, *Moltke*, in a note dated September 25, 1939. See ADAP, D, VIII, Doc. 137, p. 108.

would have contrasted with Russia, and thirdly, because he was not at all serious about the hints of possible negotiations."[8]

According to some impressions, Chamberlain "read a speech that was not his own. This makes it all the more serious."[9] In summary: "England wants war," so there would be no more Italian peace mediation. Ribbentrop nevertheless addressed the circumstances of the outbreak of war once again in Danzig on October 24.[10] He also attacked Chamberlain directly as the one who had first made threats and immediately returned to a war course after the Munich Agreement. Once again, the main topic was credibility. Chamberlain had denied that the German government had any credibility, and Ribbentrop countered accordingly by referring to the motives behind the British head of government's trip to Munich:

"Why did he do that? The answer was given in the first speech Mr. Chamberlain gave after his return to London, in which he brought home the olive branch of peace in one hand, but in the other presented the English people with a gigantic rearmament program. In other words, Mr. Chamberlain, who had hoped to dissuade Germany from its justified demands for the liberation of its Sudeten Germans with threats of war, did not carry out the threat simply because England was not ready in terms of armaments. Chamberlain had not come to Munich to prevent war, but only to postpone the war that had been decided upon by the British government."([11])

This was what people in Berlin really thought, what had been the tenor of Ribbentrop's term as minister, and what Hitler, as mentioned above, dictated to Martin Bormann in the spring of 1945.

"When the plutocratic bourgeois Chamberlain condescended to fly to the Berghof with his peaceful and deceptive umbrella to confer with an upstart named Hitler, he already knew that England would one day declare war on us. He was prepared to promise me the moon to lull me into a false sense of security. His sudden desire to travel was solely about buying time."([12])

Chamberlain's intentions may have been different at the time, for he was not one of those who wanted war at any price. Ultimately, however, his Munich approach had precisely this effect of buying time for armament purposes, an effect that intensified in the months after September 1939, as British armament continued at full speed and German industry was only able to keep up to a certain extent under the conditions of the blockade.

---

[8] Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 566, report dated October 18, 1939.

[9] Quoted from PA AA, R 27 118/279 566, report dated October 18, 1939.

[10] An audio recording of the speech is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m0dABon CkQ, last accessed on June 12, 2012.

[11] *Ribbentrop* on October 24, 1939, in Danzig, cited in DDP, 7/1, p. 372 f.

[12] Quoted in *Trevor-Roper*, Diktate, p. 99, *Hitler's* statement of February 21, 1945.

because deliveries from the USSR provided a certain degree of compensation. From Ribbentrop's point of view, the British blank check for Poland's war against Germany, which he described as an "insufficient guarantee," also fit into this picture, especially since the British government had felt compelled a few days before his speech to publicly admit that this check had only been issued for a German-Polish war, not for other possible Polish undertakings or threats to Poland.[13] Great Britain had broken this treaty in September. Poland had not been given military support. Against this background, it must indeed have seemed strange when, only a few days later, the British Prime Minister, who had personally broken the treaty, stood before the international public and made the very topic of "credibility" the central rhetorical focus of his remarks. [14]

It was easy to respond to this point. The history of the British Empire could easily be portrayed as a series of broken treaties and wars of aggression. To round off his aforementioned speech in Danzig on British credibility, Ribbentrop therefore reproached British policy for, among other things, its numerous broken promises to its allies in the First World War. Neither the Arabs had received the state promised to them at the time, nor India its independence, nor Italy the territories promised to it. Ribbentrop even took up the impossible English double promise to hand over Palestine first to the Arabs and later to the Jews as a breach of promise, finally ending with the German-English consultation agreement and the mutual affirmation contained therein to no longer wage war against each other. In his opinion, Chamberlain had never intended to keep this agreement and had now broken it.

As mentioned above, Chamberlain's previous statements on German credibility lacked conclusions. In principle, there was nothing to prevent Chamberlain from holding the Nazi regime to its earlier word with demands such as the withdrawal of German troops from the non-German territories of Czechia and Poland, or from revisiting the question raised by Berlin weeks earlier of Soviet participation in a peace settlement. Instead, the British Prime Minister, like his successor later, did everything he could to avoid making any concrete demands on Germany. Only once between September 1, 1939, and
On May 8, 1945, it was stated what Germany should do to at least prevent war with England: This was on September 3, 1939, at 9 a.m., when the English ultimatum stated that German troops had entered Polish territory

---

[13] *Ribbentrop* in Danzig on October 24, 1939, cited in DDP, 7/1, p. 373. There is a reference to the corresponding statement by Under-Secretary *Butler* on October 19, 1939, in the British House of Commons.

[14] In Poland itself, the German administration addressed the issue with a poster. It was titled "England, your work" and showed a wounded Polish soldier, mines, and the silhouette *of Chamberlain* in the background. It was reportedly one of the few successes of German propaganda in Poland. See *Lubienski*, Poland, p. 96.

unconditionally. [15] Never again were precise demands made of Germany, either publicly or secretly.

For a while, London continued to appeal to the inner-German opposition, claiming that "the German government, and it alone" stood in the way of peace. It should be removed, they said. Ribbentrop's long-standing contact, Conwell-Evans, negotiated this with Theodor Kordt immediately after the exchange of speeches between Chamberlain and Ribbentrop. They met in Bern, where Conwell-Evans informed his counterpart of British goodwill in the event of a coup d'état and was satisfied to learn that Kordt was planning the assassination of the German head of state for November 1939, with the approval of State Secretary Weizsäcker.[16] This had no consequences, as Hitler coincidentally survived the only assassination attempt, carried out by a lone perpetrator at the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich at the beginning of the month, while the internal German opposition, despite its appeals to the military in the form of Chief of Staff Halder, did not take action itself. Soon after these inconsequential episodes, all that could be heard from Great Britain was Churchill's alternative of "victory or death," and not much later, only "victory" in the form of "unconditional surrender." Compromise or

In light of this, Ribbentrop-style "commercial diplomacy" was ineffective. This applied not only to German-British relations, but also to the Soviet-Nazi agreement that had just been concluded. As it turned out, it also applied to the third of the "Big Three" whose policies were to intersect in Germany in 1945: the United States.

2. American circumstances

> "Neither the French nor the British would have made Poland a cause for war had it not been for the constant jabs from Washington. Bullitt kept telling Roosevelt that the Germans would not fight. Kennedy replied that they would indeed, and that they would overrun Europe."
>
> James Forrestal[17]

In 1938 and 1939, the Roosevelt administration's policy in Washington remained even less clear-cut than it might appear in retrospect. For years, the American public had been prepared, through culture and journalism, for an impending European war for which Germany would be to blame. In 1939, it now believed that this event was about to happen.

---

[15] See AA, Background, Doc. 477, p. 454.

[16] Cf. *Schlie*, Peace, p. 136.

[17] Quoted from *Forrestal*, Diaries, p. 121 f. *Forrestal's* notes on a conversation with *Joseph Kennedy* while playing golf on December 27, 1945. *Forrestal* was Secretary of the Navy at the time. *William C. Bullitt* was former US ambassador to Moscow, then occasionally *Roosevelt's* special envoy in sensitive diplomatic matters in Europe, and in 1939 the top US diplomat in Paris.

[18] The political situation in Washington was less clear-cut, as any direct and public interference in European war policy was still officially taboo. In fact, such interference had taken place. Some documents from the Polish Foreign Ministry, which the German Foreign Office captured in Warsaw as part of Operation Künsberg, pointed to an active American war policy that had contributed significantly to the outbreak of the conflict in 1939. A German publication of files from 1940 documented this. There, "Polish documents on the history leading up to the war" were made available to the world public in facsimile. Ribbentrop published the documents without comment. They would "speak for themselves," he said in a brief preliminary remark.[19]As a small threat for later, the volume was titled "First Series." The texts revealed that American foreign policy since the turn of 1938/39 had been recognizable as a policy of war, or at least as a policy that took war into account. In particular, the ambassador to Paris, William C. Bullitt, had announced in talks with Polish colleagues that the US would exert intense pressure on the Western powers to rule out any further concessions to Germany and Italy. If this led to war, the US would ultimately decide its outcome. Jerzy Potocki, the Polish representative in Washington, already considered American war against Germany a certainty for other reasons as well. This became the topic of daily conversation in Warsaw diplomatic circles in January 1939 and was available to the German Foreign Office in written form after the conquest of Warsaw. The official US historiography indirectly confirmed the explosive nature of the event after 1945 by declaring these documents to be forgeries:

> "These documents give the impression that men such as Ambassador Bullitt were warmongers and bore heavy responsibility for the development of the European crisis. The authenticity of these papers was immediately disputed by Mr. Bullitt and Secretary of State Hull, and was also seriously questioned by other American and foreign officials. One can therefore only conclude that these documents are forgeries and were published solely in the hope of discrediting the American administration and stirring up isolationist sentiment."([20])

---

[18] "The sympathy of the overwhelming majority of the American people belongs to our opponents, and America is convinced of Germany's guilt in the war," reported Chargé d'Affaires *Hans Thomsen* on September 18, 1939. See ADAP, D, VIII, Doc. 88, p. 89.

[19] Cf. Polish Documents on the Prehistory of the War, Berlin 1940.

[20] Quoted from *Langer*, Challenge, p. 426. The authors of these lines, *William Langer* and *Everett Gleason*, worked for US intelligence agencies during and after the war. *Langer,* for example, served as a senior member of the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and head of its "brain," the Research and Analysis Branch (R&A). See *Doerries,* Nachrichtendienste, p. 123 f. Their account of the prehistory and early war years was sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, which had received a substantial sum from the Rockefeller Foundation for a four-year historical research project, the contents of which were then reviewed by the US State Department for security reasons prior to publication.

The documents were indeed genuine. They proved that at the turn of 1938/39, Washington had embarked on a course of heightened political and journalistic confrontation with the German Reich. This did not necessarily mean that the Roosevelt administration was "warmongering," but it did mean that the Washington government supported the domestic political pressure in England on the appeasers around Neville Chamberlain, support that Chamberlain is said to have claimed forced him into war.

From Germany, there was little that could be done to influence developments within America. Relations between the two countries had been tense since 1933. This was partly due to the new German regime, but not only. Imperial Germany had already experienced a quasi-religious outbreak of American hostility in 1917, as was always available to the recognized enemies of American interests. Despite his very personal transatlantic experiences before 1914, Ribbentrop never placed the US at the center of his foreign policy considerations between 1933 and 1939. Washington's decision-making could not be significantly influenced from Berlin under any ideological auspices. American isolationism, which reached its peak in the mid-1930s with the passage of neutrality laws, also seemed to make a repeat of the American declaration of war in 1917 unlikely for the time being. In his 1933 memorandum, Secretary of State Bülow succinctly assumed that American politics would continue to show little interest in European affairs. In 1935, a US Congressional committee of inquiry, the Nye Committee, ultimately attributed the entry into the war in 1917 primarily to undemocratic machinations on the part of the arms industry. Overall, Ribbentrop believed that the US did not pose an immediate existential threat to Germany, unlike France, England, or even the Soviet Union. If the Western powers could be deterred from entering into conflict with Germany, the United States would

---

[21] This was confirmed, among others, by *Edward Raczynski*, the Polish ambassador in London, in his diaries. The authenticity was also confirmed by investigations conducted by the Hoover Institute, which came into possession of the documents. See *Hoover*, Betrayed, p. 593 f.

[22] See *Forrestal*, Diaries, p. 121 f. US Ambassador *Kennedy* put this connection on record to several people. He described the pressure that he and *Bullitt* had exerted as ambassadors in Europe, including to former President *Herbert Hoover*, to whom he reported Chamberlain's comments after the Polish-British agreement as follows: "*Chamberlain* told him (*Kennedy)* that he hoped the Americans and the Jews would now be satisfied but that he (*Chamberlain)* felt that he had signed the doom of civilization." Quoted in Hoover, Betrayed, p. 828.

[23] According to *Paul Schmidt, Ribbentrop* therefore limited the Foreign Office's American public relations efforts to three areas: 1. radio broadcasting, 2. white papers and document publications,
3. whisper propaganda. The white papers in particular were a certain success. Cf.
Schmidt, Diary, interrogation of May 28, 1946.

States certainly did not start alone. It took a comprehensive and, in retrospect, astonishing disinformation campaign targeting the American public before Franklin Delano Roosevelt was able to lead the US into war, despite the promises to the contrary he had made during the 1940 election campaign. [24]

The European tour of US Deputy Secretary of State Sumner Welles in the spring of 1940 was Ribbentrop's first – and last – opportunity to meet a representative of the Roosevelt administration's immediate circle of leaders. The Welles trip was one of a series of measures taken by the US government to emphatically remind the warring parties of its existence after the outbreak of war. Washington was to become one of the centers of world politics, and no peace settlement of the European conflict could be reached without taking into account the principles formulated there. To this end, conferences of neutral states were organized, and Sumner Welles brought this message to the capitals of the warring parties. In the process, he casually developed the ambition to perhaps be able to contain the war in line with these principles before it reached its most intense phase.

Ribbentrop also insisted to Sumner Welles that important political issues within the German capital should not be negotiated with him in the language of the warring parties. He responded to Welles' attempt to initiate a dialogue in English with silence, had interpreter Schmidt translate, and then replied in German, to which Welles responded with the ironic remark that he had unfortunately lost his ability to speak German.[25] The conversation was otherwise extremely distant. Ribbentrop began with a long monologue in which he gave an overview of German and European foreign policy in recent years as he saw it. This included a justification of the major German foreign policy steps, i.e., the occupation of the Rhineland, the reunification with Austria as a traditional part of the Reich, the Sudeten crisis, and the Munich Agreement, to which the British had responded only weeks later with the proclamation of the largest rearmament program of all time. It was also the British who had prevented a German-Polish agreement and ultimately encouraged Poland to go to war against Germany, for which – and here Ribbentrop looked meaningfully at his American interlocutor – further evidence had now been found in Polish archives. Welles rightly saw this as an allusion to the fact that these archives also contained Polish reports on the activities of American Di-

[24]The debate over the covert course of war was recently presented once again in detail from the perspective of the political opponent, former Republican President *Herbert Hoover*. See *Hoover*, Betrayed, passim.

[25]FRUS, 1940, I, p. 34, Welles Report. *Ribbentrop's* refusal to speak English on this occasion became the subject of an information report for American prosecutor *Robert H. Jackson* in 1945. See *Overy*, Interrogations, 312 f.

diplomats, in particular information about the Paris ambassador William C. Bullitt.[26] Although Count Potocki's reports from Washington could have given the impression that Washington's policy was no less aimed at war than Britain's, Ribbentrop and all of Welles' other German interlocutors refrained from making any reference in this direction. Neville Chamberlain is even said to have complained that the US had forced him into war with Germany. This view was undoubtedly shared by some in Berlin, but Welles was nevertheless welcomed and treated in the German capital as a mediator from a neutral country. The topic of conversation was British belligerence, not American belligerence. With regard to German-American relations, Ribbentrop merely made it clear that there would be no conflict of interests between the US and Germany. Germany must insist on the disinterest of the US, France, and England in Eastern European affairs, which it intended to settle in future cooperation with the USSR. This was roughly what the US would claim for the entire American double continent under the Monroe Doctrine. Welles declared this to be a misunderstanding of the Monroe Doctrine, which had since developed into a more partnership-based coexistence. In fact, he also traveled through Europe to make clear to the leading states there—all the leading states—the American desire to eliminate the old European style of power politics and spheres of influence. This was also directed against British and French war aims, as would become apparent in the course of the following year. One of the realities of international politics in the first half of the twentieth century was the American desire to establish its own understanding of politics as the sole standard in Europe.

In accordance with the course of events just described, Ribbentrop continued, a war had broken out that the British had sought and started, not Germany. The fundamental goal of British policy, he said, was obviously the destruction of Germany. Peace in Europe could only be achieved if London finally abandoned this goal.[29] As we have seen, this corresponded to what Ribbentrop actually thought after his experiences in London and had feared since the turn of the year 1937/38. It was also repeatedly stated to Welles by Göring, Hess, and finally Hitler. This left its mark. Upon arriving in London, Welles asked Chamberlain what the situation was:

> "I was very impressed that every member of the German government with whom I spoke in Berlin told me that Germany would not go to war to defend itself.

---

[26] FRUS, 1940, I, p. 39, Welles Report.

[27] "America and the Jews of the world forced England into the war," is how the wording is said to have sounded. Quoted from *Forrestal*, Diaries, p. 121 f.

[28] FRUS, 1940, I, p. 39, Welles Report.

[29] FRUS, 1940, I, p. 39, Welles Report.

> England is determined to destroy the German Reich, to make the unity of the German people impossible, to destroy Germany as such, and to overthrow the present regime. I was told that Germany was ultimately forced into war in order to protect its integrity."[30]

Chamberlain denied this German version and referred to various reassuring statements he claimed to have made regarding Germany's right to unity and self-determination. However, Welles's continued stay in London soon taught him that high-ranking figures in British politics were in fact openly discussing the destruction of the German Reich and German unity in the corridors and rooms of British politics. The desire was to teach the Germans a lesson, to devastate their country and keep it occupied for decades. Berlin should have been razed to the ground in 1918, he heard from First Sea Lord Dudley Pound·A lesson must be taught to the Germans through the destruction and occupation of their country, added Minister of War Oliver Stanley.[32] The Germans must be defeated and a different government imposed on them, demanded Anthony Eden, then Minister for the Dominions.[33] Welles heard similar sentiments from Winston Churchill, who primarily wanted to split Austria off again and restore Poland and Czechoslovakia, and fantasized about measures not described in detail by Welles that would make German hegemony over Central Europe impossible in the future.[34] Welles was already aware of all this, and Churchill had made no secret of his intentions to destroy Germany and "smash the German economy" even before the war.[35]Although there were other voices,[36]this led Roosevelt, after Welles' return and his report, to actually take a diplomatic initiative that first called for a public declaration by the two Western powers that they did not want to destroy Germany.[37] This declaration was never made. After lengthy discussions about possible new theaters of war in the Balkans or in the south of the Soviet Union, France and Great Britain preferred to take the war to Scandinavia first.

---

[30]FRUS, 1940, I, p. 75, Welles Report.

[31]FRUS, 1940, I, p. 79, Welles Report.

[32]FRUS, 1940, I, p. 80, Welles Report.

[33] Cf. FRUS, 1940, I, p. 83, Welles Report.

[34] Cf. FRUS, 1940, I, p. 84, Welles Report.

[35] *Churchill* in conversation with *Heinrich Brüning* in the fall of 1938: "What we want is for the German economy to be completely destroyed." Quoted in *Brüning*, Letters, I, p. 207.

[36] In particular, the aforementioned statement by former Prime Minister *Lloyd George* that this was the stupidest and most unnecessary war Britain had ever fought. See FRUS I, p. 86.

[37] Accordingly, the two states should state as their war aim the establishment of an intra-European structure that should include, among other things, "security for national unity and existence to all nations both large and small, including Germany." Quoted from Documents, I/1, p. 153.

Since this intention was recognized early on in Berlin, the German armed forces were able to preempt the British-French invasion militarily and also capture incriminating Allied documents. They allowed Ribbentrop to clarify at press conferences and in further publications by the Foreign Office who had been responsible for the escalation of the war. This was repeated when, during the campaign in France in June 1940, documents were also seized in Paris that clearly proved the Allied plans for the above-mentioned attacks on the Balkans and the USSR, as well as Belgian-French military agreements that were difficult to reconcile with Belgian neutrality. Together with the files on Polish-American pre-war policy seized in Warsaw in 1939, the Foreign Office and its minister thus had meaningful accounts of the issue of "war guilt" as far as the immediate outbreak and escalation of the war until the summer of 1940 was concerned. However, despite this information, Ribbentrop still faced the unresolved central task of making peace with Great Britain. The verifiable knowledge of how the opponents instead wanted to push ahead with the escalation had little influence on the chances of solving this task at first. Since May 10, 1940, the man who had been in office in London as head of government was, of all people, the most prominent member of the war party who had wanted the Anglo-German war "at any price" and now wanted to lead it to victory, not to compromise. This made the task impossible for Ribbentrop unless Churchill could be bypassed or lost his position again. In addition, an event in Eastern Europe called one of Ribbentrop's greatest successes into question. The non-aggression pact with the USSR had not, as he had hoped, prevented a British declaration of war, but it had at least seemingly ensured the neutralization of the Soviet Union for a long time. An essential element in this context was the agreement on the mutual demarcation of spheres of interest. Now this too was being put to the test and broken by the Soviet Union for the first time, just as Germany was achieving military success in France.

On June 23, 1940, the Soviet Union announced to the German government that the resolution of the Bessarabia issue with Romania could no longer be delayed and would be resolved, by force if necessary.[38]For months, Romania had done nothing to "bring about a solution," which, to the chagrin of the Romanian government, Foreign Minister Molotov understood to mean nothing other than the transfer of the territory to the USSR. Ribbentrop had expressly shown "no interest" in Bessarabia in Moscow. However, Molotov also casually mentioned to the German ambassador Schulenburg on this occasion that the Soviet claim also extended to Bukovina. This referred to a small area with a predominantly Ukrainian population, which currently belonged to Romania.

---

[38] See *Molotov's* statement to *Schulenburg*, in: ADAP, D, X, Doc. 4, p. 3, June 23, 1940.

belonged to Romania, had once been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but had never been considered part of Russia, not even during the Tsarist era. This was therefore something completely new. There were no agreements between Germany and the USSR regarding this territory, because in 1939, during the negotiations on zones of influence, the USSR had expressly claimed only Bessarabia for itself, but not Bukovina. What is more, even in the declaration before the Supreme Soviet on March 29, 1940, to which Molotov referred in his accusations against Romania, there was no mention of Bukovina. ([39] The Soviets could therefore not derive any claim from this either.

The move hit Berlin like a proverbial bombshell. When the largest country in the world claimed this comparatively small patch of land in such a provocative manner, the "balance of spheres of interest" was clearly put to the test. This initially led Hitler to ask Ribbentrop to once again present and interpret what he had actually signed in 1939. "As far as he could remember," Ribbentrop said, he had, as instructed, declared Germany's political disinterest in these areas, but emphasized its economic interest. The USSR, as stated in writing, was expressly interested only in Bessarabia. This had been formulated as generally as possible so as not to "expressly set out this claim in writing." There had been no mention of Bukovina. In any case, the German government had no choice at that time but to give in to the Russian demands. Ribbentrop told Hitler that Germany's main interest was ultimately to ensure that there would be no fighting in the region. On the same day, State Secretary von Weizsäcker noted down an initial instruction to this effect. It contained few reservations and only one concern, namely that there should be no fighting. ([41]This addressed the main issue of Germany's ultimately failed Balkan policy in the coming year.

---

[39] Cf. *Molotov*, Foreign Policy, p. 21 f. and ADAP, D, X, p. 3.

[40] See *Ribbentrop's* note to *Hitler*, in: ADAP, D, X, Doc. 10, p. 9, June 24, 1940.

[41] See ADAP, D, X, Doc. 8, p. 6, June 24, 1940. At the same time, a letter was sent to the Romanian government advising it to give in immediately on all issues and not to hope for German help.

3. Ribbentrop, the office, and the compromise peace

"I fear a German peace offer more than an air raid."

Neville Chamberlain[42]

After the armistice with France, Hitler had several papers drawn up setting out possible goals for a lasting peace: one by the Foreign Office, by a commission said to have consisted of Otto Abetz, who was soon appointed ambassador to France, Friedrich Gaus, Fritz Berber, Fritz Hesse, and Minister Ribbentrop himself. Another assignment went to the Ministry of the Interior, more specifically to State Secretary Stuckart. Stuckart was to prepare a report on how to redress the "injustice of 1648."[43] The German head of state and party leader regarded the Peace of Westphalia of that year as written confirmation of a national catastrophe into which the German nation had been plunged, not least by French power politics. Otherwise, the second opinion was in line with his regular practice of assigning the same task several times, and this time, too, the usual disputes over jurisdiction arose. Due to his background in the Ministry of the Interior, Stuckart was not responsible for foreign affairs, but he invoked Hitler's direct orders and was able to thwart every attempt by the Foreign Office to influence him in his work on his memorandum. ([44]) In this case, Ribbentrop once again failed to remain the sole head of foreign affairs vis-à-vis the dictator. By early July 1940, a whole bundle of proposals, expert opinions, and memoranda from the party, the military, the economy, and the government lay on Hitler's desk. It was solely up to him to decide which proposal he would take up, but Ribbentrop apparently succeeded in ultimately pushing through his version. Chief interpreter Schmidt reports the following in his memoirs:

"The Führer wants to make England a very generous peace offer," Ribbentrop told me a few days later in Berlin. "When Lloyd George hears this, he will truly believe us."

---

[42] In a letter to his sister *Ida* dated October 8, 1939. Quoted in *Cowling*, Impact, p. 355. The statement reflects the widespread fear in London that *Hitler* might further concretize his offer of October 6. Of course, the British government also avoided any exploration in this direction.

[43] See *Böhme*, Waffenstillstand, p. 250, and *Jäckel*, Frankreich, p. 47. According to Ministerialrat *Adolf Klas*, the order was issued in early June 1940 (see IMT, Nuremberg Document NG-3572). *Stuckart's* memorandum has occasionally been seen in connection with the security line later established in France as a prelude to a German-French border demarcation similar to that in the late Middle Ages. There is no evidence to support this. The military administrations in France acted within the traditional framework, and *Hitler's* orders for the preferential treatment of the Flemish over the Walloons in Belgium clearly show how little he expected from political activities in Romanic-populated areas.

[44] See *Böhme*, Waffenstillstand, p. 251. Despite his requests, Foreign Minister *Ribbentrop* apparently did not receive a copy of *Stuckart's* memorandum. See *Jäckel*, Frankreich, p. 47.

[45] According to *Schmidt*, this means a few days after July 10, 1940.

"probably want to throw their arms around his neck," he added. He must have discussed this offer with Hitler at length and in detail, and seemed quite certain of its effect on the British. "I wouldn't be surprised," he concluded, "if we were all sitting at a peace conference soon." I remembered what Hitler had said to Mussolini in Munich in June, how he had just now again failed to respond to Italy's exaggerated demands, and began to quietly hope that at this moment he might yet prove himself to be one of those statesmen who have brought about lasting peace by granting generous terms to the defeated."([46])

Schmidt cannot report any further details, but Fritz Hesse also describes this process and gives details of a discussion with Ribbentrop about the elements that a promising compromise paper would have to contain:

"Ribbentrop then wanted to know what these points were. Since I had often asked myself this question, I did not hesitate to answer him and replied:

1. In my opinion, peace would only be possible for the British if Germany expressly renounced territorial changes in the West, i.e., expressly renounced Alsace-Lorraine once again;

2. if we did not demand any war reparations from England, France, Belgium, Holland, and Norway;

3. if we gave a guarantee of peace in the form of either declaring our willingness to rejoin the League of Nations or accepting a substitute peace system based on an expansion of the Kellogg Pact (which immediately elicited the objection: The Führer would never accept such a thing!);

4. if we limited our territorial acquisitions in the East to the restoration of the 1914 borders;

5. if we agreed to restore the independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia under international guarantee.

On the other hand, I thought we could demand that we get our colonies back and that England sign a non-aggression pact with us, maybe in a way that would turn the Anglo-French Entente into a German-English-French one. Of course, the latter would mean that we'd have to give up our ties to Russia."

Fritz Berber also confirms this in his memoirs, but places the beginning at the end of May, when the military defeat of the Western powers was already becoming apparent. He had been summoned to Ribbentrop to outline peace terms that would be acceptable to England and had suggested as a possible basis the territorial integrity of the areas occupied by Germany.

---

[46] Quoted from *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 492 f. *Schmidt* was one of the critics of the Nazi regime and later incriminated the defendants at the Nuremberg trials with his testimony. In this respect, there is no reason to assume that he would have wanted to portray the Nazi leadership in a better light with the passages quoted here.

to guarantee. [47] Measured against the framework of European fantasies in parts of the economy or the NSDAP, these considerations were extremely conservative, but otherwise not particularly original, but roughly what the conservative resistance circles around Hassell and Goerdeler were also demanding. The occupied and conquered countries were to be vacated. Essentially, this meant rejecting hegemony over the continent in favor of stabilizing "Greater Germany" in the form of the Hitler-Ribbentrop program outlined above. From this perspective, it is not surprising that "Hitler ... remarkably agreed in essence with the ideas I presented," as Hesse noted, not without vanity.

According to Hesse, on this basis, a commission set up specifically for this purpose, which is said to have included Otto Abetz, the future ambassador to Paris, Friedrich Gaus, and Fritz Berber, among others, produced an eighteen-page text that was presented to Hitler. Upon seeing the contents, Hitler initially yelled at his foreign minister, asking what this was all about, since after all, "we had won the war, not lost it."([49]) Indeed, it had never happened before in European history that a military victor withdrew relatively willingly from newly conquered territories, and that was not going to happen this time either. However this was apparently not due to Germany, because Hitler calmed down again and, according to Walter Hewel, the Foreign Ministry's permanent representative to Hitler, included the Foreign Office's text in the speech manuscript for July 19.

---

[47] Cf. *Berber*, Macht, p. 104. *Berber's* statements contrast somewhat with *those of Hesse*: according to him, *Ribbentrop* took this remark ungraciously, and *Berber* makes no mention of a commission. However, he is so keen to downplay his relations with the Foreign Office in general and emphasizes at every opportunity that his recommendations were always rejected by *Ribbentrop* that it is very strange why *Ribbentrop* should have "forced" him in particular to cooperate, entrusted him with the publication of several document editions even during the war, questioned him about possible peace terms, was apparently available to speak to him at any time, and finally sent him to Geneva for negotiations in 1944., questioned him about possible peace terms, was apparently always available to talk to him, and finally sent him to Geneva for negotiations in 1944. It is therefore not very likely that *Ribbentrop* rejected *Berber's* advice across the board.

[48] *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 251. This vanity and the tendency to recount events from third-hand sources, obviously dramatizing them in the process, are the main objections to the reliability of *Hesse's* memoirs. It is a strong objection, but it is not sufficient to declare this account entirely fictitious, especially since *Hesse* did not shy away from expressing his sense of mission to *Hitler* or *Ribbentrop*, as has been proven. In a 1945 report for *Ribbentrop*, in which he reflects on possible approaches to peace, he claims that he "personally was only able to bring the Sudeten crisis to a peaceful conclusion by convincing *Chamberlain* that Germany's aspirations in Europe would essentially be fulfilled after this action." *Ribbentrop* was astonished, underlined the words "I personally" and drew two large green question marks in the margin." See BA NL 322, Kle-2, p. 99. As shown, much of what *Hesse* said also corresponds to other reports and *Hitler's* other views.

[49] Quoted from *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 252.

[50] Ibid., *Hesse*, Spiel, p. 256.

If the German leadership wanted to make an offer to the Lloyd George faction in England, as Ribbentrop had told Schmidt, then Lord Lothian was indeed the first port of call, especially from Ribbentrop's point of view. As ambassador to Washington, Lothian had been given the most important post that British diplomacy had to offer in 1939, which underscored his current standing within the government. But he was also Lloyd George's former private secretary from his time as British prime minister, and he had dealt extensively with Central European issues. In doing so, Lothian had shown himself to be quite friendly toward Germany. In addition, the personal contact between Hitler and Lothian was one of the first major successes of Ribbentrop's early diplomatic travels.[51] This was therefore a high-level contact with the British government. Ribbentrop therefore agreed to Lothian's meeting with the German chargé d'affaires in Washington, Thomsen. [52] This enabled Thomsen to send a report of the conversation to Berlin before July 21, 1940, which reproduced Lothian's statements as follows:

"British Ambassador (Lothian): England has lost the war. It must pay. But nothing should be done to damage its honor.

Possibilities for a cabinet consisting of Lloyd George, Chamberlain, and Halifax."[53]

These few keywords only allow us to reconstruct the Lothian-Thomsen conversation to a limited extent. Nevertheless, these few words correspond exactly to the entries in the diaries of Harold Nicolson and Ernst von Weizsäcker. Nicolson's diary is clear:

"Philip Lothian calls from Washington in the evening to ask Halifax not to say anything on the radio tonight that would slam the door on peace. He says he knows the German peace terms and that they are extremely satisfactory."[54]

But in London, Churchill had prevailed with his demand that no talks of any kind with the German government be allowed. The war continued. Hitler summarized the political options that resulted from this in the meeting on July 21, 1940. The problems and the solutions were known, and their center was to be found in London:

"If England wants to continue the war, then attempts will be made to use everything politically against England: Spain, Italy, Russia"(55)

This describes what Ribbentrop also attempted in the following months. Berlin had no plans for further conquests, such as "living space in the East." They wanted to end the war. Initially, the attempt to

---

[51] For example, on January 29, 1935, and May 4, 1937, cf. *Butler*, Lothian, p. 330 ff. On May 4, 1937, *Lothian* also met with *Göring*, and one day later with *Hjalmar Schacht*.

[52] Cf. *Weizsäcker*, Papers, p. 215, July 23, 1940, and *Weizsäcker*, Memoirs, p. 294.

[53] This is the report from *Brauchitsch* to *Halder* about this discussion. Quoted from *Halder*, KTB, II, p. 31, July 22, 1940.

[54] Quoted from *Nicolson*, Diary, p. 104.

[55] Quoted from *Halder*, KTB, II, p. 31.

To this end, Ribbentrop returned to his early foreign policy attempts to build an anti-English coalition. This was because the "French state," which had been the focus of his attention in 1933/34, played a key role in 1940.

Machiavelli once remarked that after conquering a castle, one must ally oneself with the vanquished, because one's own allies would never be satisfied anyway. The German leadership indeed had such experiences with its Italian allies. Hitler had obviously read Machiavelli and spoke in this vein in a directive, saying,
"to cooperate with this country in the most effective way possible for future warfare against England" so that France could later develop full participation in the war. This was the first in a series of eccentric plans related to the attempt to persuade Great Britain to make peace. Although the military successes of 1940 had brought Western and Northern Europe under the control of the German armed forces, Germany did not become an attractive treaty partner. France's new head of state, Pétain, had signed the armistice and appointed Pierre Laval, a seemingly pro-German head of government, but he wanted an English victory.[57] Everything else was a masquerade, as Churchill's secretary Colville noted:

> "On the surface, we should maintain the appearance of profound differences of opinion in order to deceive Laval and the Germans. Behind this veil, however, secret negotiations can take place."(58)

In the fall of 1940, negotiations were already taking place in which British politicians attempted to prevent a possible Franco-German reconciliation.[59] Even under the conditions of the summer of 1940, England proved to be the tough opponent in the diplomatic game that Ribbentrop had seen in it at the end of 1937. For this reason alone, Germany's war aims in France were already part of the bargaining chips:

> "Germany's demands on France are by no means fixed: apparently, Alsace-Lorraine and parts of Burgundy are being considered. The question of the northern departments seems by no means to have been finally resolved internally. However, the aim is to impress the NE line so deeply on the French consciousness that they will ultimately be glad to get away with their lives."(60)

---

[56] According to Directive No. 18 of November 12, 1940, cf. BA-MA N 431/262, p. 9.

[57] According to the report by Canadian envoy *Dupuy* on a visit to Vichy, cited in *Colville*, Diaries, p. 242, January 20, 1941.

[58] Quoted in *Colville*, Diaries, p. 242, January 20, 1941.

[59] Cf. *Launay*, Geheimdiplomatie, p. 55 ff. and the account by negotiator *Rougier*. *L. Rougier*: Les accords secrets franco-britanniques de l'automne 1940, Paris 1954.

[60] Quoted from *Halder*, KTB, II, p. 119, September 30, 1940. There was much speculation at the time about the purpose of the "Northern Line." It more or less followed the German Reich border.

The regions of Alsace-Lorraine and Luxembourg, which were mentioned here as secure German targets, were also still under discussion. The Nazi government was still willing to pay a high price for ending the war. In addition to forming an anti-English coalition, German foreign policy continued to bombard the enemy with hints of compromise. Signals of negotiation were received in London, offering a comprehensive German withdrawal from the countries occupied to date, including the restoration of a Polish state. All other European states in which German troops were currently stationed due to the war situation would be evacuated and restored.

While Ribbentrop's contacts with France were fraught with negativity from the outset, Spain's participation in the war seemed more likely due to strategic circumstances and the ideological proximity of the Spanish regime, which owed its existence to a civil war won only the previous year with German help. At least negotiations took place here. Ribbentrop received his Spanish counterpart in spectacular fashion:

> I can still clearly remember a remarkable scene in Ribbentrop's study. On a stand by the window overlooking the old park behind Wilhelmstraße hung a map of the French colonial empire in Africa. Su and Ribbentrop stood in front of it. "Help yourselves," would have been the abbreviated translation of Ribbentrop's lofty words. And the Spaniard helped himself! He took Oran from Algeria, wanted all of Morocco, and needed large parts of the Sahara and French West Africa to 'round off' the West African colony of Rio d'Oro. Ribbentrop willingly sold goods that did not belong to him. Apparently, no price was too high for Spain's cooperation."(62)

In its usual manner, however, the British government also offered Spain something that did not belong to it, namely French territory. On the other hand, British diplomats continued to work tirelessly to escalate the war and seek additional partners. One partner was definitely ready. After Welles' trip, Franklin Roosevelt had considered de-escalating the war in its early stages on his own terms. But it was out of the question for him to allow German domination of the European continent to become permanent, as it had been in the summer of 1940. Theoretically, the Washington administration would now have been the place to go with far-reaching German compromise offers that would have ensured this, at least to some extent. There are only vague indications that Ribbentrop also took this route and had such an offer conveyed there. They had

---

Before 1648. French refugees were prohibited from returning to the area east of this line for a long time.

61 Cf. *Gellermann*, Wege, p. 39.

62 Quoted from *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 497.

63 Cf. *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 497.

Moscow and can be found, for example, in Stalin's handwritten instructions for the Hitler-Ribbentrop-Molotov summit in November 1940:

> "Say that we have been informed of Germany's *peace proposals* to England made through Roosevelt. Is this true, and what is the response?"[64]

The UK's response to such moves was always negative, or rather, it consisted of "silence" in the months that followed. Even the most spectacular attempt, undertaken without Ribbentrop's knowledge, Rudolf Hess's flight to England, was to remain fruitless. Shortly thereafter, at the end of May 1941, one of Ribbentrop's closest associates, Minister-Counselor Gardemann, approached the British Embassy in Madrid via a Spanish intermediary to inquire whether contact could be established with the help of former Spanish Foreign Minister Beigbeder. Ambassador Hoare reported this to London. Once again, there was no response.

Only under the impression of Germany's initial successes in the Russian campaign were there indications of a possible willingness to compromise. A report from London dated July 16, 1941, claimed to have established British willingness to accept a compromise peace. It was presented to State Secretary Weizsäcker two days later. According to the report, discussions were taking place in conservative circles in London about what such a compromise might look like. However, one condition would have to be met:

> "Peace talks with England will only make sense if Soviet Russia is finished in Europe within two months and England faces the threat of annihilation within the next three months. The whole complex would therefore have to be set in motion by September/October. Greater assistance from the USA and the resulting backing for the English war parties is not expected before November/December 1941 or February/March 1942."([66])

The pressure on Foreign Minister Eden and Prime Minister Churchill had become so great that internally "even Eden" had promised to negotiate, not with Hitler, but with the German people and a representative such as Göring. Within the peace-loving faction in England, there was particular fear of a possible European confederation that would completely exclude England from Europe. It is not known whether Weizsäcker forwarded the report to Ribbentrop, but his foreign policy activities in the following two years are consistent with these considerations and recommendations. He did indeed attempt to persuade Hitler to make a peace initiative by pointing to the coming strength of the United States, and he proposed that Great Britain and the other warring parties be threatened with the facts of a

---

[64] Cf. *Bezymenskij*, Besuch, p. 114 f.

[65] Cf. *Schlie*, Peace, p. 330. *Schlie* refers to a record from the PRO: FO 371/26542/C 6735, dated May 31, 1941.

[66] PA AA, Office STS England, vol. 4, record dated July 18, 1941, here according to *Hildebrand*, Weltreich, p. 924 f.

newly founded confederation of states to make peace. It was the first of many futile attempts, as Goebbels later noted:

> "Hewel reports to me that Ribbentrop repeatedly suggested to the Führer in 1941/42 that peace should be made with Moscow, since American armaments potential would appear on the theater of war within a year at the latest. The Führer rejected this."[67]

In the fall of 1940, US President Roosevelt himself had his special envoy and later OSS chief William Donovan thoroughly test Britain's defensive capabilities, as a German victory over Great Britain was, of course, completely undesirable. After that, he felt that continuing the war by increasing support for Great Britain was a more attractive option. This led to the eventual takeover of British possessions in America by the US, increasing British debt, and finally, as part of the Atlantic Charter Declaration in the summer of 1941, the end of the British protective tariff system of Ottawa. These were long-held goals of US foreign policy. The president understood his role to be protecting the "Western Hemisphere," but he steadily and conscientiously expanded the definition of what that meant to include Europe.

The specific situation in 1940 meant that, in the fall, German activities aimed at forming an alliance between the continental powers had to be significantly stepped up if the war was to be limited and ended as desired. At the beginning of September, the British government had once again rejected a far-reaching concession by Germany, which Weißauer had conveyed to Churchill himself on behalf of Ribbentrop. This meant that the path toward a German-British understanding was no longer viable at that time, at least not as long as Churchill's government remained stable and stuck to its position. Since other political avenues had to be sought urgently, Ribbentrop's vision of a Eurasian continental bloc took on new relevance, especially since Japan, which had been considered as an ally, was now under new pressure from the US and needed support.[68] A few days after the British rejection, the German foreign minister traveled to Rome to propose, to the surprise[69] of the Italian government, a military pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan.

After a short period of negotiations, an agreement was signed between the three countries promising mutual assistance in the event that one of the partners was attacked by a power "not currently involved in the European war or the Sino-Japanese conflict." This could primarily refer to the US, and indeed it did

---

[67] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 15, p. 426, entry dated March 5, 1945.

[68] On July 26, *Roosevelt* had restricted the export of scrap metal and aviation fuel to Japan, and three days before the signing of the Tripartite Pact, a complete halt to deliveries followed when Japanese troops invaded northern Indochina. See *Rahn*, Pazifik, p. 204 f.

[69] See *Schreiber*, Southeast Europe, p. 368.

Yes, but the USSR also fulfilled these criteria. However, Ribbentrop did not gain much from playing this Japanese card. If Germany could hope for Japanese help in the event of a Soviet or American attack, this was the only theoretical gain that Berlin could possibly make in the event of war. There was no automatic alliance; discussions had to take place beforehand. Neither party was under any obligation to come to the aid of the other. Germany was the only country to unilaterally guarantee Japan military support in the event of an American or British attack in a secret supplementary agreement.

Since these provisions remained very vague and open to interpretation, the Tripartite Pact ultimately developed into one of those somewhat short-lived products that were too focused on their immediate purpose to be able to develop a long-term perspective. In this form, the Tripartite Pact achieved little more than the ambivalent public success of having concluded an agreement of global political significance. It still had to be filled with life. This happened later in an unexpected way when, after the Hitler-Molotov summit in Berlin, a large number of European states rapidly signaled their accession, signaling a neutrality favorable to Germany in the Anglo-German war. Here, the Tripartite Pact took on another topical function that had not originally been intended for it. Ribbentrop welcomed allies in a refined, solemn setting, but they did not bring peace any closer. That now depended increasingly on whether Moscow, at least, could be "enlisted against England."

4. Secular negotiations with the world revolution

> "Simply put: What did Hitler's aggression mean? Wasn't it class struggle? Yes, it was class struggle. And if a nuclear war were to break out, wouldn't that also be class struggle? There is no alternative to class struggle. This is a serious question. Peaceful coexistence is not the universal end state."
>
> Vyacheslav Molotov [72]

Germany was unable to secure the status quo in Europe achieved in 1940 on its own and found itself increasingly on the defensive strategically, partly because of the apparent growth in US hostility. According to Ribben

---

[70] Compliance soon encountered difficulties, as the USSR did not allow the transport of German military equipment to Japan and even blocked the transfer of machine tools. See BA-MA RW 19/164, p. 167, February 18, 1941, lecture by Major *Radtke*.

[71] The Foreign Office attempted to achieve this on a cultural level by publishing lavishly designed and partly trilingual illustrated magazines on "Rome-Berlin-Tokyo."

[72] Quoted in *Molotov*, Politics, p. 20, interview of July 7, 1976.

In Ribbentrop's view, this was a way out that made Soviet influence useful for Germany, but actually avoided a genuine connection. In his view, "secular standards" should be applied. This led to an ideology-free form of imperialism, to direct or indirect control over spheres of influence, raw materials, and people. From Ribbentrop's point of view, the Soviets could possibly be won over to such an agreement, which would greatly expand the balance of interests concluded in 1939, not least at the expense of Great Britain. Territorially speaking, the USSR would have made the greater gain. Ribbentrop outlined the situation and his offer to Molotov as follows:

> "The Reich Foreign Minister informed Mr. Molotov of the content of the agreement he had outlined: ...
>
> In the Tripartite Pact of September 27, 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan agreed to oppose the expansion of the war ... The Soviet Union declares its solidarity with this objective and is determined to cooperate with the three powers along these lines. ...
>
> The agreement itself would be made public. In addition, a confidential (secret) agreement could be reached on the main points of the four states' territorial aspirations.
>
> As far as Germany is concerned, apart from the European territorial revisions to be carried out at the conclusion of peace, the focus of its territorial aspirations would be in Central Africa.
>
> Apart from the European territorial revisions to be carried out at the conclusion of peace, the focus of Italy's territorial aspirations would be in North and Northeast Africa.
>
> Japan's aspirations still had to be clarified diplomatically.
>
> The focus of the Soviet Union's territorial aspirations would probably lie in the south of the Soviet Union's territory towards the Indian Ocean."[73]

In addition, Ribbentrop offered free passage through the Turkish straits, exclusively for Soviet ships, something that Great Britain had never conceded and a kind of condominium of the three European powers over Turkey. He once again explicitly advocated a Japanese-Russian non-aggression pact, even addressing the controversial Japanese coal concessions on the Sakhalin Peninsula and wanting to see them changed in accordance with Russia's known wishes.

So Central Africa for Germany, North Africa for Italy, status quo for the European area after the spheres of interest had already been balanced, and a privileged Russian position vis-à-vis Turkey, while the Middle East would be entirely for the USSR—this was how the German foreign minister envisioned the future. But Molotov did not take up Ribbentrop's offer and responded to the proposal

---

[73] Quoted from ADAP, D, XI/1, Doc. 329, p. 473 f.

Instead, the German foreign minister responded with a new barrage of questions on completely different topics. He left no doubt that the Germans had to relinquish all their influence in Europe and announced the agreement on mutual spheres of interest concluded with Ribbentrop only a year ago. According to Stalin's wishes, Finland, the Danube, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria (the main issue of the negotiations), Turkey, Iran, Greece, Yugoslavia, the Great and Little Belts, the Öresund, the Kattegat and Skagerrak([74]) and Spitsbergen were now to fall to the Soviet zone. This came as a shock to Ribbentrop. Unlike Hitler, however, he was not convinced that the USSR would attempt to back up this claim with a military attack on Germany.

Immediately after the Berlin summit talks, Molotov pressed the Japanese government once again. In Berlin, there had been talk of Japanese oil concessions in the north of Sakhalin Island, i.e., on Soviet territory. The USSR wanted these rights back; that was one of its conditions for joining the planned continental bloc. In the same brusque style he had displayed in Berlin, Molotov informed the Japanese ambassador in Moscow shortly afterwards that there would be no formal Japanese-Soviet non-aggression pact because the USSR first wanted to regain southern Sakhalin and parts of the Kuril Islands, which had been lost in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/05. So they claimed parts of Japan for themselves, according to Molotov, as part of an "overall policy aimed at regaining lost territories." Ribbentrop was unable to
November 19, 1940, a few days after Molotov's departure, according to a report from the German embassy in Tokyo The USSR was therefore pursuing goals vis-à-vis Japan for which it wanted to keep the option of waging a war of aggression expressly open. The Soviets could hardly have rejected the continental bloc policy more clearly. If this was also an expression of an "overall policy," then Molotov's remarks about Poland and Finland, which he had expressed to Ribbentrop, took on a clear meaning. These countries had also once belonged to Tsarist Russia. Either Molotov's statement was a diplomatic bluff, or, as in Berlin, it announced a direct claim to the central security interests of the German state. For Ribbentrop's alliance policy, both possibilities could spell the end. On the other hand, these demands could still be interpreted as "secular." If the USSR were to pursue a policy of tsarist revisionism, this would threaten Germany's position in Central Europe in the traditional sense. However, it would have implicitly meant renouncing a comprehensive European revolution and opened up the possibility of

---

[74] *Molotov* drew a comparison between the Baltic Sea exits and the Black Sea exits, as *Ribbentrop* described to Swedish Legation Councilor *Erik von Post* about a year later. See ADAP, D, XIII, II, Doc. 364, record dated September 28, 1941.

[75] Cf. ADAP, D, XI/2, Doc. 371.

to divert the USSR to some of the old goals of the Tsarist Empire. These included Istanbul/Constantinople and the Anglo-Russian "Great Game" of the nineteenth century for Central Asia and the Orient.

A week after Molotov had announced Moscow's claim to Sakhalin, the official Soviet response to the German offer arrived in Berlin on November 26, 1940. Surprisingly, the Soviet Union now appeared willing to accept Ribbentrop's draft of a four-power pact under certain conditions:

1. German troops would have to be withdrawn from Finland, which would ultimately belong to the Soviets under the previous year's agreement on spheres of interest. In return, the USSR undertook to respect German economic interests in Finland and to "ensure peaceful relations with Finland."

2. In the coming months, a mutual assistance pact must be concluded between the USSR and Bulgaria, which ultimately belongs to the USSR's "security zone." In addition, the USSR must gain control of the Turkish straits, secured by military bases and a long-term lease.

3. The focus of future Soviet aspirations should be "the area south of Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf."

4. Japan was to renounce its concession rights in northern Sakhalin.

Secret protocols also stipulated that, in the event of Turkish refusal, the signatories would jointly enforce the aforementioned objectives by military means and that Bulgaria would have to conclude a mutual assistance pact, but that its sovereignty and "internal regime" would not be affected.

Measured against previous events, this response was surprisingly moderate. For example, the statements about Finland and Bulgaria could be interpreted as meaning that the USSR had adopted the German interpretation of what it meant for a country to be part of a Soviet "sphere of interest." For Ribbentrop, this had meant from the outset a kind of political and military supremacy, not a right to annexation and Sovietization. The Soviets now held out this prospect for Bulgaria and Finland, but only explicitly for Bulgaria, not for Finland. Ribbentrop himself had offered Molotov in Berlin almost verbatim the "Baku area with a general direction towards the Persian Gulf" as a direction for expansion and found the current statements entirely satisfactory. On the other hand, the points that were not mentioned in the Soviet reply were naturally disturbing. These included Romania and its oil, as well as numerous other points that had been discussed in Berlin, such as access to the Baltic Sea and Poland, which would be included in Molotov's "territories to be regained." Here,

It was foreseeable that they would have to be renegotiated soon. The call for joint military action against Turkey was astonishing. Moscow wanted to seal the new four-power pact with bloodshed, so to speak. That would have sent a drastic signal to the United States and Great Britain.

Ribbentrop saw this Soviet response as offering at least some chance of realizing his plan. For the moment, it appeared that the Soviets would refrain from further expansion into Central Europe. Perhaps the signing of the Four-Power Pact and the joint military action against Turkey could persuade the British government to call off the war now. This would mean that the Soviet-German rapprochement would belatedly have fulfilled the purpose for which it had been initiated in 1939. On the other hand, there were, of course, "costs" and dangers. In addition to the problems already mentioned in Romania, whose oil wells, which were of existential importance to the German economy, would be very close to a Red Army stationed in Bulgaria, joint German-Soviet-Italian action in this region could lead to states whose interests were threatened, such as Bulgaria and Turkey, joining forces with Greece and Yugoslavia to form a united military resistance together with Great Britain. This would mean precisely the kind of general Balkan war that the United States and Great Britain were striving for – and ultimately achieved – and which Berlin wanted to avoid.

After all, once the Four-Power Pact had been concluded, this war, which was inevitable anyway, would be fought with the backing and direct military support of the USSR. Ribbentrop was therefore prepared to accept the Soviet offer. When he attempted to convey this step to the Bulgarian leadership, he was naturally met with rejection. No one in Sofia wanted a mutual assistance pact with the USSR and thus Soviet troops in the country. The fascists ruling in Rome also categorically rejected Soviet control of the Turkish straits. This left Berlin with the decision of whether to override the Bulgarian and Italian ideas. In local party circles, the treaty with the USSR had always been rejected by many. Ribbentrop had heard so often that he would be violating National Socialist "principles" that he could no longer bear to hear the word.

Only the head of state and dictator could decide whether to accept the Soviet offer despite this resistance, and he ultimately rejected it as well. Molotov's appearance in Berlin had convinced Hitler that the USSR wanted Germany to lose and would seize every opportunity

---

[76] According to *Ribbentrop* in an interrogation by political officers of SHAEF in June 1945. Cf. Overy, Interrogations, p. 313.

would exploit it to seal it militarily. A few months earlier, he had justified the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 to Mussolini by saying that he had – as in the case of the Brenner border with Italy – "clearly demarcated the zone of interest; this will never change again."[77]Now Molotov had unambiguously demanded that something had to change beyond the existing agreement, which he described as "exhausted." Objectively, there was no possibility of reaching a final settlement with the USSR on the zone of interest. Instead, new demands would follow. One day before the Soviet pact proposals were handed over, the Communist International had received further green light from Molotov for agitation in the German sphere of influence. ([78])The communist restructuring of Germany itself was also already being pushed forward by the Soviet embassy in Berlin. ([79])This did not go unnoticed. Hitler soon summoned his foreign minister and excitedly informed JvR that "the Soviet trade delegation in Kurfürstenstraße had 960 Russians under its command and groups of five or ten Russian functionaries were already organizing communism in the factories."([80])

Such information was reminiscent of 1918, when the German Empire had paid little attention to who was traveling through Germany from the then newly founded Soviet Union and for what purpose. The consequences were well known, and the shock of the German November Revolution, which was also caused by this, was one of the central political motives that led to the founding of National Socialism. The second great imperialist war, which Moscow had expected and which it believed to be in its heated phase since the Japanese-Chinese conflict of 1937, was supposed to decisively advance the revolution. From the Soviet point of view, the key to this lay once again, or rather, still in Berlin. Even another interim pact would not change this. Ribbentrop was not completely forbidden from further contacts with the USSR, but he was not allowed to respond positively to the Soviet reply of November 26, 1940, and so it was better not to respond at all. Instead, he shifted his focus to intensifying German-Soviet economic negotiations, which came to a positive conclusion in January 1941.

The Berlin Summit and its follow-up negotiations became one of the most significant events not only in German national history, but at least

---

[77] Cf. ADAP, D, VIII, Doc. 663, letter from *Hitler* to *Mussolini* dated March 8, 1940.

[78] "We would not be communists if we did not stick to this course. But it must be done quietly," *Molotov* told General Secretary *Dimitrov*. Conversation *between Dimitrov and Molotov* on November 25, 1940, quoted in *Dimitrov*, Diaries, p. 320.

[79] *Vladimir Semjonov,* who later served as ambassador in Bonn for many years, was also involved in this.
"If the Soviet army were to come to Germany, we would need to know how to carry out land reform here, taking into account the soil conditions in the various regions." Quoted from *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 84.

[80] Cf. *Overy*, Interrogations, p. 314 f.

of European history. Had the USSR decided to actually join the Tripartite Pact on the terms mentioned, the history of Germany, Europe, and probably the world would have taken a different course. Regardless of the further ideological and domestic political developments of the signatory states, it would probably have led earlier to a multipolar world order, as it finally began to take shape at the beginning of the 21st century. From the perspective of these negotiations, one of the deadliest wars in world history, the German-Soviet conflict between 1941 and 1945, can be seen as a war that developed out of the ongoing Anglo-German confrontation. The USSR did not want to end this conflict, but rather to trump it, as Stalin later said, by marching into Paris. The fact that this happened with obvious parallels to the Napoleonic Wars once again raised the question of whether the constraints of international politics and military threat scenarios did not overshadow the plans and ulterior motives of their actors. For Ribbentrop personally, November 1940 was, in a sense, the conclusion of his eight-year journey to the heights of European politics. He did not know it yet, but despite all his further efforts, Molotov was to be the last non-German politician he would meet in the context of existentially important negotiations. Hitler had concluded from the Berlin negotiations and numerous other indications that sooner or later the Soviets would enter the war on the British side. He continued to try to end the war before that happened, which led to Rudolf Hess's flight to England in early May 1941, which he kept secret from Ribbentrop. But Germany's tyrant was also determined not to wait for a Soviet attack, the likelihood of which was becoming increasingly urgent in the spring of 1941. His military advisers also unanimously assured him that if the Wehrmacht launched an attack itself, the USSR could certainly be decisively defeated in 1941.

Ribbentrop did not believe in the inevitability of German-Soviet conflict. Even in his postwar memoirs, he maintained that "it could have been possible—albeit through concessions on our part—to avoid a confrontation with Russia."([81]) For him, the decisive question at this point was who had more to offer, Germany or the Anglo-Saxon powers. This was clearly a misjudgment of the Soviet view of Germany, which fundamentally did not envisage Germany playing an independent role as another imperialist great power. Germany was to be supported, as Stalin had announced, but not to the point of asserting itself or consolidating its position under the conditions of 1939/40, but rather to the point of extensive Sovietization when the opportunity arose. The principle

---

[81] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 240.

The USSR's willingness to compromise, which would be speculated about for decades until its demise, did not exist under the conditions of Stalin's war communism of 1940 towards Germany. Ribbentrop's diplomats in Moscow, who were responsible for these matters, shared his contrary views on this issue. Against this backdrop, he endeavored to convey the position of the German embassy in Moscow to Hitler. There, too, they did not believe in a Soviet attack and counted on the Soviet Union's loyalty to the treaty, both in terms of the non-aggression pact and the comprehensive economic cooperation that had been negotiated in the meantime. At a meeting apparently arranged by Ribbentrop, Ambassador Schulenburg presented his case in this vein, but was unable to convince Hitler. There was too much evidence to the contrary. Walter Hewel, the liaison between Ribbentrop and Hitler, finally noted down Hitler's arguments at the beginning of June:

> "... 'Difficult decision,' but trust the Wehrmacht. Air force: fighters and bombers superior in numbers. Some concern for Berlin and Vienna. Occupied territory no longer stretches from Denmark to Bordeaux. All forces concentrated on the western border. Largest mobilization in history. If it goes wrong, everything is lost anyway. Once it's done, Iraq and Syria will take care of themselves. Then I will be free to finally push through Turkey. If the French lose Syria—and I am convinced that Syria is lost—the only danger is that they will also lose Algeria. Then I will immediately push through Spain and cut off the English from the Mediterranean. It is only the miserable waiting time that makes one so nervous."([82])

Given the circumstances, the attack was the only and last chance, as we know today. The Soviet deployment, which according to available information was already the "largest deployment in history," was far more extensive than Hitler realized at the time. The Red Army had many times more equipment and tanks than was known in Germany. The entire European part of the USSR was a single staging area, with troops constantly moving westward. Orders had already been given by the Red Army to go on the offensive.[83]Nevertheless, Ribbentrop was extremely nervous as he awaited the Soviet ambassador in Berlin. Whatever his specific motives may have been, what he had to hand over to Dekanozov meant not only war, but also the final bankruptcy of the policy he personally represented of a continental bloc consisting of Germany, Italy, Japan, and the USSR. In a few minutes, this bloc would be missing its central element, and the existing land bridge to Japan would be lost for the foreseeable future, even in the event of military success and the achievement of the line from Astrakhan to Arkhangelsk. The occupation of Siberia and Central Asia was beyond Germany's political plans and military capabilities. Thus, the attack that was to begin in a few minutes closed the gateway to East Asia, which the Foreign Office had laboriously negotiated.

---

[82] Quoted from *Hewel*, Diary, June 8, 1941.

[83] Cf. *Ueberschär,* Angriff, p. 191.

had been opened. The non-aggression pact and the German-Russian friendship treaty, the agreements particularly associated with the name Ribbentrop, would be history. Paul Schmidt was impressed:

> "I had never seen Ribbentrop so agitated as during the five minutes before Dekanozov's arrival. He paced back and forth in his room like a caged animal. 'The Führer is absolutely right to attack Russia now,' he said, more to himself than to me, over and over again, as if he wanted to calm himself down with these words. 'The Russians would certainly attack us if we didn't do it now.' He paced back and forth in the large room several more times, extremely agitated, his eyes flashing, repeating these words."(84)

This appearance left no doubt that preventive war had been a central argument for attacking Russia, even for Hitler's foreign minister. All other accounts claiming that this was merely a propaganda thesis presented to the outside world or even developed after the defeat are incorrect. This should be noted once again at this point, because it was precisely interpreter Schmidt who proved as a witness at the Nuremberg trials and later as a memoirist that he could be considered above suspicion with regard to any particular sympathy for his former boss.

After regaining his composure, Ribbentrop received Dekanozov and his interpreter Bereschkov at around four o'clock in the morning.[85] It was a sober encounter, and a sobering one for the Russian side. Dekanozov had tried throughout the evening to speak to Ribbentrop in order to complain about German violations of Soviet airspace. As on previous days, the foreign minister sent his apologies. Now he spoke first and repeated to Dekanozov what he had said to Schmidt earlier:

> "The Soviet Union's increasingly hostile attitude toward Germany and the threat to Germany posed by the deployment of Soviet troops on the German eastern border have prompted the Reich government to take military countermeasures. The memorandum he presented to the Soviet Russian ambassador contains the reasons that forced the Reich government to take these countermeasures."(86)

---

84 Quoted from *Schmidt*, Statist, p. 539.

85 *Bereschkov* later published his memoirs and a colorful account of the entire event. For the entertainment of his audience, he added a few embellishments, as is often the case when it comes to the Third Reich. In 1939, the British ambassador had spread the rumor that *Ribbentrop* had spoken too quickly to be understood at the decisive meeting on the eve of the war. *Bereschkov* thought it appropriate for 1941 to claim that *Ribbentrop* had whispered his regrets after the conversation and had been drunk. In doing so, he overlooked the fact that there were other eyewitnesses who could correct this. See Christ und Welt, October 1, 1965:
"A Russian in the Reich Chancellery," as well as the handwritten transcript of the conversation by German interpreter *Roland von zur Mühlen*. Quoted from BA-MA MSg 2/2099.

86 Quoted from *Roland von zur Mühlen*, BA-MA MSg 2/2099.

Ribbentrop did not wish to provide further explanations in response to Dekanozov's corresponding counter-question, but then emphasized once again the behavior of the USSR in the Yugoslav crisis and its support by the Soviet Union "when Germany wanted to stab it in the back."[87]He reiterated emphatically that Germany was not to blame for this development. Dekanozov accepted the message and described the German reasons as "clearly stated." He did not consider it necessary to pass on the contents of the German memorandum to Moscow.[88] They shook hands and Ribbentrop proceeded to receive the representatives of the rest of the diplomatic corps, who were already waiting outside the door. This meant that the options available to the German foreign minister had once again diminished, as the German state was now largely at war with the world's major powers. However, Ribbentrop understood the existential importance for Germany of a victory over the USSR, and at the same time doubted it. Therefore, he did not allow himself to be blinded by the initial military successes and, without Hitler's approval or knowledge, attempted to persuade Japan to attack the USSR as well, despite the Japanese-Soviet non-aggression pact.[89] His counterpart there, Matsuoka, also responded positively to Ribbentrop's argument that Japan would no longer have to reckon with a war against the US after the final defeat of the Soviet Union. He recommended that the government and the emperor halt preparations for "southern expansion" toward Indonesia and concentrate on the USSR. On July 2, 1941, in the presence of the emperor, the final decision was made not to do so. In a manner typical of the times, the decisive factor was not respect for their own signature on the Japanese-Soviet pact, on which the ink was barely dry. It was decided to make troops available for the invasion of Siberia. However, they were only to march when the USSR was no longer a serious military factor. Ribbentrop could only note this with regret. The deterrent effect on the USA, that other superpower which had been making efforts for months to intervene in the hot war against Germany as soon as possible, had been one of the important motives for his initiative in Tokyo. Ribbentrop had little influence on US policy otherwise. After the war with the USSR began, Hitler's permanent residence was moved to quarters outside Berlin, which meant that Ribbentrop had to accompany him and was therefore hardly present in Berlin as head of the ministry for the time being. His room for maneuver in foreign policy shrunk at all levels.

---

87 Quoted from BA-MA MSg 2/2099.

88 Cf. *Schramm*, OKW, II, p. 409.

89 Cf. *Ribbentrop's* telegram to *Ott* dated June 28, 1941, here according to *Hillgruber*, Strategie, p. 485.

90 Cf. *Hillgruber*, Strategie, p. 487.

91 "For three and a half months, *Mr. von Ribbentrop* has had to stay away from Berlin, with the exception of 48 hours," *Weizsäcker* informed Ambassador *Stohrer* on October 6, 1941. See ADAP, D, XIII, II, Doc. 383, p. 504. However, *Ribbentrop* avoided

In addition to the list of the defeated, Ribbentrop also had to deal with a number of foreign policy problems following the conquest of Western Europe by German forces, which arose from the situation in the colonies of the defeated or occupied countries. While the French possessions in Africa and the Middle East were to remain under the control of the French government according to the armistice agreement, and this government also had the necessary military means and the will to enforce these agreements there, the French possessions in Southeast Asia, and especially the equally rich Dutch colonial possessions in what is now Indonesia, were located in an area of interest that Japan would have liked to claim for itself. From a military point of view, neither France nor the Netherlands could do anything significant to prevent a Japanese occupation. What prevented Tokyo's politicians from taking such a step for the time being was therefore primarily the threat of conflict with the Anglo-Saxon countries. On the other hand, after the surrender of the Dutch armed forces, the German government could theoretically have made some claim to its own activities in Indonesia. In any case, Japan actually feared such an intention,(92) which gave Ribbentrop the opportunity to make another nonchalant declaration of German disinterest. He acted contrary to Weizsäcker's suggestion, who wanted to deal with this point with a general statement that Germany wished to maintain "the current situation in the Dutch East Indies" in view of the threat of action by others, namely the Allies and the US, but did not want to say anything about Germany's fundamental interest. Ribbentrop, on the other hand, instructed the Tokyo embassy on May 20 to issue the following statement: "Germany has no interest whatsoever in dealing with such overseas issues, in which it continues to consider itself uninterested."(93)He further stated that he had no objection to the Japanese government publishing this German position.

This was therefore a signal in many directions. On the one hand, it was a signal to Japan, which was effectively given a German "blank check" for its actions in Southeast Asia·On the other hand, it was also a signal to Germany's enemies in Paris and London. The German Reich continued to fight a European war to assert its position of power in Central and Eastern Europe. The two Western powers were now to recognize this and keep the rest of the world. Otherwise, they would have to defend it alone, in contrast to the repeatedly offered German guarantee of defense for the European empires, especially the British Empire. There was still...

---

the "bunker atmosphere" in *Hitler's* headquarters. Although he made sure to be close to the head of state, he took up permanent residence outside, in East Prussia, for example, at Steinort Castle, the seat of the *Lehndorff* family. See *Vollmer*, Doppelleben, passim.

92 Cf. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 334 f.

93 *Ribbentrop* to *Ott*, May 20, 1940, quoted here from *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 333.

94 According to *Thilo Sommer's* definition, cf. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 335.

For a while, but not much longer, was the implicit message that Berlin sent explicitly to the war's opponents through various channels. Ribbentrop's blank check declaration to Japan was written on May 20, 1940, and although the Allied disaster in France was already clearly looming, it was not yet a fait accompli. Three days earlier, on behalf of Göring and apparently also Hitler, the Swedish consul general in Paris, Raoul Nordling, had already spoken with the head of government there, Reynaud. Nordling had just made a stopover in Berlin on his way back from Stockholm to Paris and had been sent on by Göring with the message:

> "Mr. Reynaud should immediately present us with proposals for an armistice. We are prepared to grant France reasonable terms. If he wishes to prevent the occupation and destruction of his country, he should act quickly. In a few weeks, it will be too late. The offer I am authorized to make him today will not be renewed. The longer France hesitates to acknowledge the obvious facts, the harsher our terms will be"([95]

Reynaud listened to Nordling, but did not appear willing to respond in any way. As would become apparent later, Ribbentrop's declared lack of interest in overseas issues therefore had the sole side effect of deepening the rift between the Western powers and the US on the one hand and Japan on the other. It helped to pave the way for the signing of the Tripartite Pact four months later on September 27, that "preventive defensive alliance" ([96] for which the future ambassador Stahmer was sent to Tokyo as a special envoy in the summer of 1940 to promote it further.He arrived there on September 7, 1940, and was highly regarded, as Stahmer was considered a particularly close confidant of Ribbentrop. The key Japanese ministers noted this with satisfaction at a conference in the run-up to the talks.([98] During the negotiations, however, Ribbentrop considered Stahmer and Ambassador Ott to be untrustworthy. Without the minister's knowledge or consent, and in some cases even against his express orders, the two made various agreements with the Japanese government. These agreements resulted in nothing less than "a watering down of the published alliance obligations by softening the automatic nature of the treaty, extending the alliance to include Japan's involvement in a war with Great Britain, and a qualified waiver of the former Pacific possessions of the German Reich in favor of Japan."[99] The term "exceeding authority" is rather inadequate to describe this process. Ott and Stahmer's ambition to finally bring about a German-Japanese treaty apparently caused them to abandon all restraint. Accordingly, even after his return, Stahmer dared to

---

[95] Quoted from *Benoist-Mechin*, Himmel, p. 122.
[96] Cf. *Hillgruber*, Strategy, p. 204.
[97] Cf. *Martin*, Deutschland, p. 19.
[98] Cf. *Sommer*, Powers, p. 387.
[99] Cf. *Sommer*, Powers, p. 437.

return to Berlin, he failed to inform the foreign minister of the exchange of notes, with the result that, in the midst of the world war, the German leadership did not know what it had actually promised its only treaty partner of any military significance. This led to grotesque scenes during the visit of Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka in the spring of 1941, when Weizsäcker and Woermann prepared documents for the upcoming talks at the Foreign Office that were contrary to the treaty. Stahmer, who was once again involved in the preparations, still did not have the courage to point out the actual agreements that existed, but instead managed to have the relevant points excluded from the talks. (100) Stahmer undoubtedly still had a restless time and was probably glad when Matsuoka finally left again. Once again, Ribbentrop had had little luck with a personnel decision.

5. The Second American-German War

> "We did everything conceivable to defeat Germany, and we said so publicly. ... I am not discussing whether that was right and necessary. But when Germany finally pounced on us and declared war on its most aggressive enemy on earth, it is not a contribution to 'historical truth' (to put it mildly) to claim that this war was forced upon us."
>
> Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg[101]

> "When the attack on Moscow failed, the Nazis decided to conquer Chicago."
>
> Statement by a museum guide in Berlin's Bendlerblock[102]

Literature on World War II generally states that the German head of state and party leader declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941. This came as a surprise even to those closest to him. Both statements are only partially correct. During interrogations in 1945, JvR occasionally attempted to set the record straight about how events unfolded. (103) Under international law, there are several ways in which states can declare war on each other. Those who wish to declare war can, on the one hand, inform their future adversary before the start of "hostilities," so

---

100 Cf. *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 438. In his memoirs, *Stahmer* felt compelled to downplay his renunciation of former German possessions as a "non-binding personal statement." Cf. *Stahmer*, Sieg, p. 31.

101 Quoted from the foreword by *Michael Freund* in: *Taylor*, Origins, p. 10.

102 This was stated, apparently without irony, during an official tour in the presence of the author of these lines.

103 Cf. *Overy*, Interrogations, p. 616, note 15.

This is determined by the Hague Convention of 1907.[104] The Convention does not provide any information on what exactly constitutes hostilities in detail and what constitutes a reasonable period of time to be observed "before" their commencement. Even among legal experts, there is no consensus on this issue. The British government, to cite one example, considered a period of two hours between the delivery of the declaration of war in Berlin at 9 a.m. and the start of war with the German Reich at 11 a.m. on September 3, 1939, to be reasonable. A short period prevents the attacked state from taking measures to defend itself – or to rescue ships and persons located abroad. This is another reason why the twentieth century saw a steady tendency to shorten this period, insofar as war was still formally declared at all. The 19th century, which did not yet have any written conventions of this kind but more often adhered to unwritten rules, sometimes experienced long transition periods. People trusted the convention. Even when a Prussian-Austrian war threatened for the first time in the summer of 1865, the Prussian king and his chief minister Bismarck were staying in Bad Gastein for a cure, i.e. on the territory of the potential enemy. It was considered impossible that this could end with the capture of the Prussian leadership.

However, the Hague Convention also takes into account the possibility that military conflicts may break out between two states without a prior declaration of war. This occurred frequently in international politics in the twentieth century, for example in 1962 between India and China or in 1969 between China and the USSR. In such cases, a state of war is deemed to have been established when the two warring parties formally break off diplomatic relations after the outbreak of hostilities. This was the case with the German attack on Poland in 1939, which Germany deliberately did not refer to as a war in order not to jeopardize the chances of a negotiated settlement with the Western powers and Poland despite the fighting. However, Poland and Germany then broke off diplomatic relations, the entire diplomatic corps of both countries was able to leave the territory of the enemy unhindered,[106] and a state of war formally prevailed.

As far as German-American relations were concerned, they had already been in a state of undeclared war for some time. In his New Year's message on January 4, 1939, Roosevelt had already spoken of "methods short of war" that would enable American intervention in the world's trouble spots. This formulation was the mid-1930s

---

[104] See Article One of the text of the 1907 agreement in: http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/0_515_10/a1.html.

[105] See *Willms*, Nation, p. 374.

[106] This is a relatively little-known event in historiography. Sweden took over the representation of Polish affairs in Germany as the protecting power. Poland's ambassador *Lipski* joined the Polish army. See *Lipski*, Diplomat, p. VIII.

years due to American neutrality legislation, which made open military action by the president almost impossible. Under international law, however, Roosevelt's methods were steadily approaching an act of war. During negotiations on the Tripartite Pact aimed at preventing American entry into the war, Ribbentrop therefore wanted to insert the term
"veiled attack" into the text of the treaty in September 1940. [107] But this attack was hardly veiled anymore, at least after Roosevelt's re-election in November 1940. The US was already waging an economic war against Japan, which was steadily heading toward armed conflict. This was also discussed and acted upon so openly that interested observers could hardly have been surprised by subsequent developments.

The unilateral arms deliveries and loans to Germany's enemies, the assistance provided in practical warfare in the North Atlantic, and finally the order to fire on German ships were open acts of war. The American president had decided not to accept the status quo that had emerged after the summer of 1940 and the defeat of France. While Ribbentrop was still conducting political and economic negotiations with the Soviet Union at the turn of 1940/41, the economic part of which was successfully concluded in January 1941, Anglo-American staff meetings had already begun in Washington that same January. The two states were planning to wage a world war together. It was to be waged primarily against Germany.[109] On March 29, 1941, the negotiations were successfully concluded. Victory was considered certain. The USSR played no role in the plans, either as an ally or as an opponent. Two days earlier, on March 27, a military coup against Germany had taken place in Yugoslavia, which had been supported by both the British and American governments. The Mediterranean strategy agreed upon by both countries at the outset could take its course. But even in the United States itself, there was still room for "short of war" military measures. One day after the conclusion of the negotiations between the general staffs, the president ordered the seizure of all German, Italian, and Danish ships in American ports. They were converted into American "property" and handed over to Great Britain. ([110]) Throughout the summer of 1941, the United States was already acting as a belligerent power toward Germany. On June 14, for example, the Italian

---

[107] Japanese diplomats rejected this term as too vague. See *Sommer*, Mächte, p. 401.

[108] Almost a year before the outbreak of the hot war, *Peter Riebe's* incredibly prescient book on the "World War in the Pacific" was published in Oldenburg in January 1941. *Riebe* pointed out the decisive importance of the transfer of the US fleet to Pearl Harbor for the outbreak of this war and that concentration camps had been prepared for the internment of the Japanese living there since 1939. See *Riebe,* Pacific, p. 69. f.

[109] See *Hillgruber*, Strategie, p. 405 ff.

[110] Cf. *Hillgruber*, Strategie, p. 401 f.

German and Italian assets in the United States were seized. This was followed by the closure of consulates. On September 15, Secretary of the Navy Knox declared that the United States would effectively be at war the following day, September 16, 1941:

> "The US fleet has orders to capture or destroy all Axis merchant ships, whether surface or submarine pirates, that come in its path, using all means available. ... America must offer not only the shield, but also the sword, to achieve victory. He then expressed his appreciation to the Russians for their resistance and declared that everything would be done to continue to provide war material for that country. Likewise, China and Poland must receive the necessary war material for his (sic) armies in Canada, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Norway for their emigrated armed forces."(111)

Ribbentrop reported the new situation to Hitler, along with Admirals Dönitz and Raeder. It was still believed that a change in submarine warfare tactics would be an effective response. At the end of October 1941, JvR received one of numerous reports from the Washington embassy informing him of the latest developments regarding the repeal of the neutrality laws. According to these reports, Roosevelt wanted to repeal them completely and could count on the support of both parties in Congress.
"Willkie Republicans" among his opponents in last year's presidential election. [113]Roosevelt's prospects were good. The repeal of the laws would be followed by military incidents, and the incidents would ultimately lead to war. But as long as no incidents occurred, the German threat was simply fabricated. The ink on Chargé d'Affaires Dieckhoff's report on the domestic political situation in the US was practically not yet dry when the US president appeared before the American press with new forged documents. In this case, it was a map showing Germany's intentions for the division of South America, as well as Hitler's alleged plan to "eliminate all existing religions in the world" and "replace the Bible with words from Mein Kampf." Ribbentrop had these forgeries—and that is indeed what they were—identified as such in a circular letter. In fact, the British secret service had taken up the pen and supplied the US government with forgeries.

One day later, another circular from JvR followed, which now laid down the official line that the accusation made by Roosevelt in his speech on Navy Day, October 27, 1941, that Germany was the aggressor, was to be rejected. An official German statement declared "that it was in fact the United States that opened fire and attacked Germany."(115)

---

111 Quoted from KTB SKL, A, vol. 25, p. 255, September 15, 1941.
112 Cf. KTB SKL, A, vol. 25, p. 273, September 17, 1941.
113 Cf. ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 427, Report by Ambassador *Dieckhoff* dated October 27, 1941.
114 Cf. ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 439, *Ribbentrop* circular dated November 1, 1941.
115 See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 441, *Ribbentrop* circular dated November 2, 1941.

No conclusions were drawn from this at the time, even though the fact was indisputable and was comprehensively confirmed by contemporary historical research after 1945, with a positive emphasis on Roosevelt.

A press report that arrived in early December 1941 – and which was accurate – about Washington's plans for a US army of up to five million men, which was to go to war against Germany in the summer of 1943,[116] apparently tipped the scales in favor of a formal German declaration of war. The planners in Washington had even taken a German victory over the USSR into account. They believed that it would not be able to prevent the British-American invasion. Ribbentrop claims to have advised Hitler against formally declaring a state of war.[117] Nevertheless, after a long and generally accurate public listing of all American offensive steps, the dictator announced that he could openly declare the long-running war of the United States "also on our part."[118] The US had indeed started this war. It was the second against the German state within twenty-five years, and it was the second to be declared without any threat from German forces, of its own free will and in its own American interest. Ribbentrop formally presented the German declaration of war to the American chargé d'affaires Morris at 2:18 p.m. on December 11.

---

[116] See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 541, *Thomsen* report of December 4, 1941, on the corresponding reports in *the Chicago Tribune* and the Washington *Times Herald*. *Reinhard Gehlen* retrospectively dates the discovery of the US armament plans based on press reports incorrectly to the spring of 1942. He suspects that the source was a leak in the president's immediate circle, which, according to US General *Wedemeyer,* had not been uncovered even by internal US investigations. See *Gehlen,* Memoirs, p. 22. See also *Doenecke,* Danger, p. 45.

[117] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs,

[118] See *Domarus*, Hitler, II, p. 1808.

[119] Cf. *Martin*, Deutschland, p. 45. *Ribbentrop* had instructed the German chargé d'affaires in Washington, *Thomsen*, by telegram to take the same step at 3:30 p.m. in Washington. See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 572, telegram from *Ribbentrop* to *Thomsen.* As *Bernd Martin* notes, the German original of this telegram cannot be found at the location specified in the ADAP. See *Martin,* Deutschland, p. 44.

X. Interim assessment: The Foreign Office, the Minister, and the Holocaust

It has happened. In addition to many other inaccurate accusations and unsubstantiated claims about Joachim von Ribbentrop, the story has now been spread that the murder of European Jews was his initiative. This was spread by the commission of historians commissioned by former German Foreign Minister Josef Fischer to investigate the past of the Foreign Office during the Nazi era, which presented its report at the end of 2010. On page 185, the following sentence can be found:

> "The fate of German Jews was sealed on September 17, 1941: On that day, Hitler met with Ribbentrop. Immediately preceding (sic) the meeting was Hitler's order to deport German Jews, who had just (sic) been marked with the Jewish star, to the East."(1)

Regardless of the chronological sequence implied by this wording, the authors claim that the Foreign Office thus took "the initiative to resolve the 'Jewish question' at the European level." There is no evidence to support this statement, especially not for the role of the foreign minister as claimed here. The authors of the "Amt" apparently know nothing about what was discussed between Hitler and Ribbentrop on that day and do not even attempt to provide evidence for their insinuation. The claim that the discussion concerned the deportation of German Jewry to the East, i.e., to a region over which the Foreign Ministry had no influence, is therefore pure fantasy. It serves the authors of the study to assign the Foreign Office a decisive role in the Nazi persecution and murder of Jews, which it did not have. A glance at the editions of the Federal Archives would have been enough to dispel these speculations. On that day, Ribbentrop was once again engaged in the foreign policy business that had been customary in recent months, namely how to respond to increasing American aggression. We have already touched on this briefly:

> "On September 17, 1941, the Reich Foreign Minister, Grand Admiral Raeder, and the Chief of the U-Boat Force, Dönitz, met with the Führer to discuss the situation created by the American declaration on armed escort to Iceland and the resulting consequences for the war in the Atlantic."(2)

---

1 Quoted from *Conze*, Diplomaten, p. 185.

2 Report by *Werner Koeppen* to *Alfred Rosenberg* dated September 18, 1941, quoted here from Vogt, Berichte, p. 20.

There are no indications or reasons to believe that any other topics were discussed, as US Secretary of the Navy Knox had effectively declared war on the German Reich two days earlier.[3]

In response to criticism of this passage, the historians involved defended themselves with a lengthy article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, in which they explained the reasons for their position, but ultimately only confirmed that they had no grounds for their assertions beyond their own prejudices. To this end, they quote the recommendation of a clerk from the Foreign Office's representative office in France named Carltheo Zeitschel, who, in response to the threat of extermination made by the Jewish publicist Kaufman against the German people ("Germany must perish"), is said to have recommended to the ambassador there, Abetz, that European Jewry be exterminated instead. According to historians Conze and Frei—again without evidence—Abetz may have presented this idea at meetings with Ribbentrop or Hitler.[4]They failed to take a look at the minimum standard of primary sources that should be considered for publications on the politics of the Nazi state. They are expressly unaware of the transcript of the conversation between Hitler and Abetz printed in the ADAP, which makes no mention of the persecution of Jews.[5] In fact, however, Hitler did not need a Foreign Office clerk to bring Kaufman's book to his attention. He was already familiar with it and, together with Joseph Goebbels, had discussed a brochure six weeks earlier that was distributed in large numbers among the German population. [6]

Ultimately, historians Conze and Frei initially retracted their claims to a large extent, only to then resort to equating deportation with murder:

> "It was foreseeable that the majority of the deported Jews would most likely perish, even if no decision had yet been made about the total extermination of the Jews. The deportation and the mass extermination that was later carried out were both equally criminal."(7)

---

[3]President *Roosevelt* added to this in general terms that the US would offer the countries at war with Germany "not only the shield, but also the sword to achieve victory." See KTB SKL, A, vol. 25, p. 255, September 15, 1941. As a result, the decision of September 17 was made for "proposals that Chief SKL will present to the Führer in today's lecture in the presence of the B.d.U." Ibid. KTB SKL, A, Vol. 25, p. 273,
September 17, 1941.

[4] See Süddeutsche Zeitung, December 10, 2010: "Our book has struck a nerve."

[5] The authors expressly state in the foreword to the 2012 paperback edition of "Amts" that "no minutes of these conversations have been preserved." See http://www.randomhouse.de/content/edition/excerpts/304631.pdf, p. XVIII.

[6] See *Goebbels*, Tagebücher, II/1, p. 271, August 19, 1941. For more details on the overall reception of Kaufman's book among Nazi leaders and comparable ideas in the dialogue between *Robert Vansittart* and *Winston Churchill*, see *Scheil*, Eskalation,
p. 337 ff., chapter "Ausrottungsphantasien" (Extermination Fantasies).

[7] See Süddeutsche Zeitung, December 10, 2010: "Our book has struck a chord."

This equation of deportation—in which a supposedly decisive role of the Foreign Office continues to be assumed without evidence—with extermination serves the authors, as already mentioned, for purely accusatory purposes. From a historical perspective, this equation is abstruse. Instead, it was precisely the difference between deportation and death that the Nazi regime wisely relied on, because the key figures were well aware that neither the German population nor the armed forces, nor even the members of the NSDAP, would have accepted the deportation of all Jews with the declared aim of their death. The stated aim was publicly declared to be "labor." Ribbentrop was also prepared to support the legal isolation of German Jews and their eventual deportation under appropriate pressure. However, it was neither his concern nor his business, but rather something that, in his view, had existed in the three major Western European states of Spain, France, and England at times, in some cases for centuries, and which in no case could be considered a key political action. For him, the ongoing war was not a "Jewish-Bolshevik" enterprise, as the inner circle of ideologically committed National Socialists increasingly convinced themselves. Ribbentrop had opposed this development, even if it made him once again unpopular within the regime. During his stays in Moscow, he spoke specifically with Lazar Kaganovich, then Soviet Minister of Transport, who was shrouded in mystery in National Socialist circles and enjoyed a questionable reputation in Germany as the most influential Jewish figure in the Soviet leadership.([8])Ribbentrop gained a personal impression, which was confirmed by further research he ordered. There had been no "serious action controlled by international Jewry between Moscow, Paris, London, and New York." ... There may have been connections between these cities and countries via the Comintern headquarters, and there were certainly Jews working there. But the idea that an international Jewish headquarters was systematically working to Bolshevize the world is, in my opinion, untenable."([9])

Now, this impression, in various forms, was increasingly at the center of the German head of state and party leader's thinking, who suspected Judaism of being a "principle" and driving force in both Moscow and Washington. Ribbentrop considered this to be apolitical and wrong. He also clearly disagreed, and his statement after the end of the war that he could not share Hitler's view of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy should therefore not be regarded as a mere attempt at defense after the fact. ([10])For him the war was

---

[8]During his stay in Moscow, *Ribbentrop* sat directly next to *Kaganovich,* to whom *Stalin* made a special toast *on* this occasion as "our responsible commissar for railways," as *Vyacheslav Molotov* recalled decades later. See *Molotov,* Politics, p. 12 f.,interview with *Molotov on* December 3, 1982.

[9] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 210 f.

[10] See also *Peter Longerich* in this regard. See *Longerich*, Propagandists, p. 41.

a power struggle in which Judaism as an ethnic-religious group also played a political role. In his view, however, this role was neither necessary nor decisive, and certainly not one that could justify collective persecution. Ribbentrop's attempts to establish the "Ribbentrop Office" without taking into account Nazi clichés and their rules on "non-Aryanism" or "Jewish kinship" should also be seen in this context.

This section now seeks to explore the relationship that the German foreign minister actually had to Nazi policy toward the Jews, particularly between 1938 and 1945. It was written before the publication of Das Amt, but this debate made it even more necessary. It deals with Ribbentrop's fundamental attitude toward policy toward the Jews, his reactions to the measures against European Jews that came to his attention, and his involvement in these measures in the course of his duties as minister. This includes the question of the mass killings of Jews, known as the Holocaust.

In the relevant Holocaust literature, Joachim von Ribbentrop is generally not accused of approving or initiating the disenfranchisement or persecution of Jews by the National Socialist regime.[12] This aspect of National Socialism remained alien to him, given the circumstances. Although various historians tacitly assume that he was aware of the existence of extermination camps, there is no evidence of this anywhere. This applies both to general accounts[13] and to specialized studies on individual aspects and areas.[14] Ribbentrop himself pointed out in his memoirs that he had seen problems with the Jews in Germany, but that he had spoken out against the specifically anti-Jewish legislation, such as the Nuremberg Laws, solely because of the foreign policy repercussions.

---

[11]He managed to "retain" these employees until around 1937, when they became the subject of an investigation initiated by Reinhard Heydrich. See Ray, Abetz, p. 218 ff.
Reinhard Heydrich. See *Ray*, Abetz, p. 218 ff.

[12] *Richard Evans* also reacted to the portrayal of the "Office" in this sense. See *Evans'* review essay in: Neue Politische Literatur, vol. 59, issue 1, 2011, as well as the corresponding commentary by *Patrick Bahners* in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of June 8, 2011, p. N3.

[13] One exception is *Christopher Browning*, who attests that the Foreign Office and the minister were actively involved in matters such as the Madagascar Plan. But even he does not link *Joachim von Ribbentrop* to the final decision to commit genocide or its execution. Some of the work on the subject, however, does not even mention *Ribbentrop's* name, such as *Rainer Baum's* study on "The Holocaust and the German Elite" or *Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's* wide-ranging argument in "Hitler's Willing Executioners."

[14] To give one example: *Ribbentrop's* name does not appear in *Robert Seidel's* 2006 dissertation on "German Occupation Policy in Poland," which deals in detail with the history and individual phases of the killing of Jews, among other things. See *Seidel*, Besatzungspolitik, passim.

Instead, he generally pushed for an "evolutionary development in the Jewish question."[15] However, his views on evolutionary development never had a decisive influence on Hitler and became increasingly less influential as the war progressed. Hitler increasingly believed that English and American Jews were essentially the driving force behind the war against Germany. Hitler had already been reinforced in this view in the run-up to the war by, among other things, the statements of the English ambassador Henderson, who sought to refute Hitler's criticism of English government policy shortly before the outbreak of war by referring to third parties:

> "The attitude toward Germany is not the will of the English people. It can be traced back to Jews and Nazi enemies."[16]

Against this backdrop, Joachim von Ribbentrop's views on the "Jewish problem" must always be seen in the context of the times, in which—as we have seen and will continue to see—politicians in all countries assumed that Judaism was a politically influential force. There are other examples of attitudes similar to those of Henderson. In January 1939, the Polish ambassador to Washington, Potocki, reported that war against Germany was practically a done deal in the American capital and that this matter was being driven primarily by Jewish circles on the American East Coast. These reports reached Berlin as diplomatic rumors as early as January 1939. They were later captured in Warsaw as originals and published in 1940 under the responsibility of Joachim von Ribbentrop.

Back to the aforementioned discussions between Ribbentrop and the German head of state about the role of Judaism in international politics and the consequences of German anti-Semitism. According to his account, he repeatedly referred in his discussions with Hitler to historical examples, such as England's uncompromising war against Napoleon or Wilhelm II, both of which either predated any demonstrable Jewish influence (Napoleon) or were directed against a decidedly pro-Jewish policy such as that of Wilhelm II. Jewish influence, even if it were to make itself felt against Germany and its current anti-Semitic policies, was therefore secondary, not a "primary cause of war." He was undoubtedly correct in this assessment, regardless of what else may have been said elsewhere among the English leadership.

---

[15] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 271.

[16] Quoted from ADAP, D, VII, Doc. 200, p. 179, conversation *between Hitler and Henderson* on August 24, 1939. *Henderson* does not mention this statement in his memoirs, but otherwise reproduces the conversation in roughly the same content, albeit only a fraction of the length of the ADAP record. See *Henderson,* Failure, p. 256 f.

[17] Foreign Office (ed.): Polish Documents on the Prehistory of the War, Berlin 1940.

[18] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 274.

There were numerous other reasons and constellations that led to the war of 1939 and its escalation. No single party, neither in Germany nor elsewhere, was solely to blame.

In connection with these discussions and Nazi policy toward the Jews, it is also noteworthy that radicalization took place here after the outbreak of war. When Ribbentrop speaks of a "vicious circle,"[19] , i.e., a vicious circle of mutual radicalization through Nazi anti-Semitism and anti-Nazi actions abroad, this corresponds to what is generally accepted in the research literature. Ribbentrop attempted to break this circle and was perceived within the SS as a person who opposed the deportation measures. Adolf Eichmann later recalled accordingly:

> "If it was a matter of fundamental issues, such as the lack of legal basis for an order to the security authorities to concentrate the Jews and hand them over to the German authorities, then a completely different approach had to be taken. After a working conference on this matter, the legation councilor sent a report to his superiors and, via the latter, to the Reich Foreign Minister. After consultation with the Reich Foreign Minister, this report was either rejected or accepted. If a negative decision by the minister was imminent, it was my task to inform the head of the Sipo and the SD via Group Leader Müller. Corresponding letters were then prepared for the Reich Foreign Minister; if the difficulties were very great, even the Reich Leader himself wrote. These letters informed the Foreign Minister of the situation, so that he had no choice but to decide in accordance with the Reich Leader's wishes. In such cases, the Reich Leader referred to Führer orders, which even von Ribbentrop could not ignore."([20])

According to this, the Foreign Ministry of the German Reich was inevitably involved in certain aspects of the proceedings, against the will of the minister. This included the Foreign Office's involvement in the deportation of European Jews to camps and ghettos in the "East," which took place before the eyes of the European and world public. It was officially presented as a measure necessary for the war effort and not as preparation for extermination, but rather for resettlement to a location yet to be determined. In his study on the "unleashing of the Final Solution," Christopher Browning names Franz Rademacher and Martin Luther as the driving forces in the Foreign Office in this matter. ([21]) In Luther's case, for example, this was expressed in the fact that he did not consider it necessary to inform the minister about the Wannsee Conference.

---

[19] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 272.

[20] Quoted from *Aschenauer*, Eichmann, p. 236 f. *Robert Kempner* also recounts this connection. A phone call from *Ribbentrop* to Undersecretary *Luther,* in which the minister requested an audience with the Danish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian governments regarding the "evacuation of Jews," was initiated by "*Eichmann* via *Himmler*." See *Kempner,* Eichmann, p. 236.

[21] See *Browning*, Unleashing, p. 131 ff.

which took place in January 1942. It was only at Ribbentrop's express request, who was apparently disturbed by reports of anti-Semitic policies taking place within his jurisdiction in the summer of 1942, that Luther wrote a twelve-page comprehensive report on Nazi Jewish policy, in which he described the conference as too unimportant to warrant informing the minister. However, he did inform State Secretary Weizsäcker.(22)

In his memoirs, Rudolf von Ribbentrop writes that in the summer of 1944, his father showed him press clippings from the foreign press in which, after the Red Army had taken the Majdanek concentration camp, there was talk of a large number of people having been murdered there, and then asked him whether he thought this was possible.[23] He replied that this was probably just propaganda, like the alleged chopped-off children's hands in Belgium during the First World War. Indeed, from the perspective of a German soldier at the front, there was no reason to know about such stories, let alone confirm them from personal experience. As Israeli historian Mark Bryan Rigg has demonstrated, this was even true of "Hitler's Jewish soldiers," i.e., members of the German armed forces who, according to the Nuremberg Race Laws, were actually considered Jews or Jewish half-breeds, but who nevertheless served for various reasons. Even they, among whom the later German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was probably the most prominent name, knew nothing of a general killing of Jews, as Rigg concluded after conducting several hundred interviews with them[24].

As for when the German foreign minister learned of the existence of the Majdanek camp, he gave the American investigators the same date after the war:

> Question: How many Jews do you estimate were exterminated?
>
> Answer: I have no idea. I don't know. I only heard about it, first in Majdanek, and then after the collapse on the radio, when I was still ... before I was arrested.
>
> Question: Do you have any idea whether it was a large number or a small number?
>
> Answer: I don't know anything about it. I can't tell you. I haven't the faintest idea.
>
> Question: Would you be surprised to learn that more than four and a half million Jews were exterminated?
>
> Answer: That is not possible.

---

[22] Report by *Luther* to Ambassador *von Rintelen* from August 1942, printed in *Kempner*, Eichmann, pp. 224–235, here p. 227. *Rintelen* presented the content to *Ribbentrop*.

[23] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, pp. 428 f.

[24] Cf. *Rigg*, Soldiers, pp. 309 ff.

Question: Why is it not possible? Answer: It

is not possible.

Question: Why do you say that it is not possible?

Answer: It must have been propaganda. There is no question about that."[25]

At this point, the interrogation came to a standstill. In fact, the number of fatalities known and widely accepted today was considered literally "inconceivable" by contemporaries at the time. This can be seen, among other things, in the limited response that corresponding publications received in the US during the war, but also in the reaction of the Secretary of State documented here.

Overall, Joachim von Ribbentrop's statements about when he first heard about the mass killings of Jews in the form of Allied press reports are entirely consistent. His statements are also confirmed by employees of the Foreign Office. Sebastian Weitkamp refers to a "Majdanek experience" at the Foreign Office due to the large number of similar statements.[26] Many employees of the Foreign Office learned for the first time about the information that would be disseminated by the Allied authorities in the future. When the press reports about Majdanek appeared, according to information provided by Emil von Rintelen, the head of Thadden's department was instructed to inquire with the SS leadership about the veracity of the press reports. The order was given to Thadden by State Secretary Gustav Adolf von Steengracht, who had replaced Ernst von Weizsäcker in this position on March 31, 1943. According to Rintelen's impression, Steengracht had consulted with von Ribbentrop on this matter, who, after the SS leadership's meaningful silence on the allegations, is said to have decided not to insist further. Although von Rintelen can only report indirectly on this decision himself, his account appears to be accurate based on other information.

In official statements, the concentration of the Jewish population was, as mentioned above, considered preparation for forced emigration. On November 26, 1941, Ribbentrop received Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivan Popov and told him, among other things, that

"at the end of the war, all Jews would have to leave Europe. This was the Führer's irrevocable decision."[28]

---

[25] Interrogation of *Joachim von Ribbentrop* by Justice *Jackson* on October 5, 1945, in the presence of Colonel *John H. Amen* and Colonel *Howard A. Brundage*. Original conversation in English, quoted here from *Overy*, Interrogations, p. 527 f.

[26] Cf. *Weitkamp*, Diplomaten, p. 442.

[27] Cf. *Döscher*, Diplomatie, p. 292. *Döscher* bases this on multiple personal statements made to him by *Rintelen*.

[28] Quoted in *Hilberg*, Vernichtung, p. 510, conversation *between Ribbentrop and Popov* on November 26, 1941 (NG-3367).

Raul Hilberg calls this the "resettlement legend in its most developed form."[29] However, there is nothing in principle to contradict this, and even Hilberg can offer no further justification as to why the Foreign Minister might not only have said this, but also meant it. Undersecretary Luther mentions the same statement by Ribbentrop to Popov in a twelve-page report that Luther sent to the Foreign Minister in August 1942, which contained an overview of German policy toward the Jews from the seizure of power in 1933 to the summer of 1942.[30] Ribbentrop was informed here about planned deportations of European Jews to camps and the planned forced emigration after the end of the war; there was no mention of killing.

[29] Cf. *Hilberg*, The Destruction of the European Jews, p. 510.
[30] Cf. *Kempner*, Eichmann, p. 222 ff.

XI. Politics in times of war

1. Europe as a point of escape

Confederation of States or Elimination of State Clutter – Ribbentrop vs. Hitler

While the war situation for the German armed forces was clearly deteriorating in Russia and North Africa, Ribbentrop was faced with the question at the beginning of 1943 of whether and how he could use foreign policy to help end the war. Deterrence remained the primary focus. Germany could not win the war offensively by military means. The necessary occupation of the territory of one or more of its main opponents had proved impossible. The only option left was to make victory so costly for its opponents that they would prefer a compromise. To this end, foreign policy had to improve the military situation without further worsening the prospects for such a compromise. Any viable peace settlement had to respond to the growing European consciousness in all states and, from their point of view, make the facts created by Germany since 1939 appear acceptable, initially to the allies and neutrals, and in the long term, if possible, also to the enemies. This required a recognizable European policy that went beyond the current state of German occupation regimes. In principle, of course, everything remained dependent on the outcome of the military conflict. What had been achieved in European policy since 1941 was therefore directly influenced by this conflict. Ribbentrop was also aware of this, but nevertheless attempted to create facts on the ground that could be useful for a military victory for the German cause. For him, this included the establishment of a confederation of states that would give the occupied and unoccupied countries a certain degree of security with regard to their future and, ideally, turn the occupied countries into German treaty and alliance partners.

The atmosphere between the minister and the head of state had been tense since the ideological developments in the first weeks of the Russian campaign. In his memoirs, JvR reported on a clash he had with Hitler, which again concerned the increasingly ideology-driven political leadership. A debate about questions of jurisdiction gradually escalated into a loud argument about Jewish policy and ideological issues, which ultimately ended with both men shouting at each other: "I asked to be excused and received

approved it," Ribbentrop wrote. He did not provide any further details about the points of contention. In his memoirs, he stated that the dispute took place in the spring of 1942. Hitler was under the impression of the setbacks in Russia and was still suffering from the aftermath of Hess's flight. Other sources place the date in 1941 or even specifically on July 28, 1941. (2)The information probably mixes several events. Shortly after the start of the Russian campaign, Ribbentrop calmly offered his resignation, as was customary. As minister, he had been responsible for the policy of German-Soviet reconciliation and the non-aggression pact, and had spoken out against the attack on the USSR. It was customary internationally to replace the foreign minister, as well as the minister of any other department, after the failure of a political objective so strongly associated with his name. Hitler apparently calmly rejected this offer of resignation in the summer of 1941. In the spring of 1942, the aforementioned dispute arose, followed by others.

Meanwhile, the "old National Socialists" had become highly radicalized under the influence of various events. The book "Germany Must Perish," which had been brought to the attention of both Hitler and Goebbels in the summer of 1941, played an important role in internal National Socialist debates. In it, the author, Theodore Kaufman, called for the physical extermination of the German people. The Nazi leadership assumed that Kaufman was close to the American president and took him seriously. Goebbels made plans for a high-profile counterattack, which he also had approved by Hitler. On July 26, 1941, Goebbels wrote in his diary:

> "The people must know that Germany is now fighting for its very existence and that we have to choose between the absolute liquidation of the German nation and world domination."(5)

Later, in his speech declaring war on the United States and on other occasions at the turn of 1941/42, Hitler publicly announced the extermination of European Jewry on several occasions. This had to be regarded as a drastic announcement, even if the term "extermination" was not even taken at face value by those affected at the time.

---

1 See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 256.

2 This date is given by *Michael Bloch*, citing a corresponding statement *by Adolf von Steengracht*. See *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 368 f.

3 In this sense, see also the information provided by *Rudolf von Ribbentrop* to the author in July 2012.

4 *Paul Schmidt* reported on several clashes between *Hitler* and *Ribbentrop*, who then attempted to "rehabilitate himself as a propagandist" instead of continuing with foreign policy. See *Schmidt*, Diary, statement of May 28, 1946. *Schmidt* attributed the conflicts to *Hitler's* hysterical disposition. See *Schmidt*, Diary, March 12, 1947.

5 See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II/1, p. 118, July 26, 1941. On *Hitler's* approval and thus his knowledge of Kaufman's book, see *Goebbels*, Diaries, II/1, p. 271, August 19, 1941.

was taken and that this did not represent the decision-making situation, any more than it did in the summer of 1941. But developments were already underway, at least since the Völkischer Beobachter announced the end of Judaism on its front page in October 1941: "They dug their own grave!" was the headline, naming Theodore N. Kaufman, among others, as the cause of the coming and already ongoing mass murder.

In the weeks following the start of the Russian campaign, however, Hitler became increasingly radical on other issues as well. He distanced himself from plans to establish independent states on Russian territory and, despite Ribbentrop's resistance, increasingly excluded his ministry from Russian affairs. This did not prevent Ribbentrop from occasionally bringing up the original plans again, as we shall see. Ribbentrop's increasing distance from the ideas that the head of state and party leader was developing in an increasingly radical manner can be demonstrated by a number of details. With the growing interpretation of events in the government headquarters as a "decisive battle," he believed that any foreign policy—which was naturally ambivalent—would be severely hampered. The dimensions to which the political conflict and then this war escalated were undoubtedly unexpected for Ribbentrop. He had not made himself available for this in 1932. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in removing himself from office. In any case, he did not take the leave of absence that had already been granted in the dispute, but instead obtained a promise from Hitler that he would refrain from further threats of resignation.

One of the foreign policy projects that could be continued even under the war conditions and the dictator's suspicious scrutiny was the creation of a European consciousness through appropriate publications. In February 1943, Ribbentrop, as patron of a "Handbook on Europe" published by the German Institute for Foreign Policy Research, brought together twenty-six authors for this purpose. These were people who faced very different futures. Among them was Ambassador Ulrich von Hassell, who was executed the following year for participating in the coup attempt of July 20, 1944, as well as Roland Freisler, who sentenced him to death as president of the People's Court and who himself was soon to be killed in an air raid. Also among them were Carl Diem ("European Sport"), who later became the long-standing president of the German Sports Federation, and successful post-war authors such as Paul Schmidt, alias Paul Carell ("The Axis as the Foundation of the New Europe") and Jacques Benoist-Mechin ("France in the New Europe"). Minister of Economics Funk negotiated the
"economic reconstruction of Europe" by reprinting an article published in October 1941 in

---

[6]"The American Jew *Nathan Kaufman*, who has close ties to President Roosevelt, was so frank as to proclaim the complete extermination of the German people as the favorite wish of world Jewry." Quoted from Völkischer Beobachter, October 27, 1941.

Speech given in Rome. In his contribution, Ulrich von Hassell clearly criticized the prevailing conditions, which he said were characterized by a lack of belief in the power of ideas in politics, with one exception: belief in the idea of power. He advocated defining the term Lebensraum as a concept of peace which, in contrast to imperialism, would enable all its participants
"economic prosperity, ... but above all the free development of their intellectual and ethnic characteristics."[8]

Ribbentrop himself contributed a foreword that once again assigned responsibility for the war to England, which had been started in order to enforce the doctrine of the balance of power once more. To bring the USSR into position against Germany for this purpose was a grave mistake that would destroy the British Empire itself, even if successful, a success that Germany and its allies would naturally prevent.[9] This was so true that British imperialism was already certain to be one of the losers of this war, even though the ruling Prime Minister Winston Churchill was by no means prepared to grant India or other parts of the Empire independence. Churchill continued to assume that the British colonial empire could be preserved after the war, provided that the main obstacle to what he saw as an active British overseas policy, namely the German Reich in the immediate vicinity of England, could be removed. For Ribbentrop, on the other hand, the aim in the spring of 1943 was to exclude England from European affairs once and for all.

In March 1943, he finally presented a plan for a European confederation of states, which was to serve this purpose, among others. It was to be proclaimed during the war, "as soon as we have achieved a significant military success," and it was to give the smaller European states the assurance "that a Gauleiter would not be appointed in their countries immediately after the end of the war."[11] According to Ribbentrop's ideas, a number of states were eligible for membership in such a confederation, including allies, occupied countries, and friendly neutrals. In addition to Germany and Italy, he had in mind France, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and Spain.[12] Others could also be added to this list.
"more or less independent" states, which were still to be created in the German-occupied parts of Europe. Ribbentrop provided further details on this

---

[7] Cf. *Hassell*, Lebensraum, p. 27.

[8] See *Hassell*, Lebensraum, p. 33.

[9] See *Ribbentrop*, Europa, p. VII.

[10] In his memoirs, *Ribbentrop* mistakenly states that it was in the winter of 1941/42 that he attempted to persuade *Hitler* to hold a European conference at which the independence and integrity of European states would be established and guaranteed, presenting him with a "major memorandum." See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 257.

[11] See ADAP, E, V, Doc. 229, March 21, 1943.

[12] Spain was marked with a question mark.

This point is not mentioned. In view of the previous list, this could only refer to the occupied territories of Poland and the Soviet Union.[13] The accompanying draft of the founding act of the alliance then explicitly named Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as founding members. It thus rejected the annexationist intentions that existed in some quarters of the NSDAP with regard to these countries and instead aligned itself with the legal opinion of the United States. The US government did not recognize the incorporation of the three Baltic states into the Soviet Union in 1940 until they regained their independence in the 1990s. With this draft, Ribbentrop risked a conflict within the regime.

Nevertheless, his intentions were supported by political practice in those areas and by Hitler's statements. Before Operation Barbarossa, Hitler himself had stated that the political goal of the campaign in Eastern Europe was the establishment of states:

"Our task is to build socialist states that depend on us with a minimum of military force"[14]

This remained the basic tenor of Hitler's statements on this subject in various variations, one of which we will soon learn about, which differed radically from the others. Since war in Eastern Europe could not be avoided due to the Soviet threat of attack and the blackmailing maneuvers of Soviet foreign policy, despite all Ribbentrop's attempts at a "secular settlement," Hitler wanted to defeat the Soviet Union militarily and, if successful, dissolve its European part into nationally organized parts. This represented one option for German policy toward the Soviet Union, but it was never formulated without contradictions. Nevertheless· it was pursued. Six months after Ribbentrop's European plan, at the turn of 1943/44, a government called the "Belarusian Central Council" actually began work in Belarus.(16) Previously, in 1941, with the establishment of a Belarusian

---

[13] In his memoirs, *Ribbentrop* states that he also proposed the restoration of Poland on this occasion. See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 257.

[14] According to *Jodl's* summary of *Hitler's* statements on March 3, 1941, quoted here from *Betz*, Landkriegsvölkerrecht, p. 109.

[15] A decree issued by *Hitler* in July 1942 referred to "areas of the Soviet Union that were planned to be placed under German administration or German sovereignty" and generally ordered the cessation of the Foreign Office's activities in the "European part of the Soviet Union" in favor of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories under *Rosenberg's* leadership. See *Stuby,* Gaus, p. 411. In October 1941, he had given *Rosenberg* his approval that names such as Livonia, Lithuania, and Latvia should remain as "geographical designations." On the same occasion, he held out the prospect of an independent Ukraine after a 25-year period of protectorate. See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 372, *Lammers'* notes on the conversation *between Hitler and Rosenberg.*

[16] For this and the following, see *Chiari*, Alltag, 98 ff. From the spring of 1943 onwards, both *Ribbentrop* and *Goebbels* demanded German propaganda in Eastern Europe that emphasized the local population's desire for freedom and work and rejected any

National Church, a task that the Metropolitan received in October 1941. When the Red Army later returned to the suburbs of Minsk, seminars were still being held to educate a Belarusian elite. In this respect, Ribbentrop could assume in the spring of 1943 that Hitler would not be fundamentally opposed to the plan to establish socialist states on Soviet soil. However, there are statements by the dictator on this point that contradict each other in a striking way; we will come back to this.

Ribbentrop saw the advantages of a confederation primarily in a calming of the situation and a return to a level of political negotiability on all sides. In addition to alleviating the Allies' fears of future Gauleiters, the confederation was intended to reassure neutral countries such as Sweden, Turkey, and Portugal about German annexation intentions and prevent them from "becoming too closely involved with England and America." The populations of the newly founded states would be reassured, and Italy could be assured of its continuing important role. In Ribbentrop's opinion, the confederation would have a deterrent effect on the Soviets, as well as on the British and American governments. At the same time, it would influence public opinion in both countries.

However, Ribbentrop emphasized France's new role as the key point. A European confederation of states in the form outlined would be a German-Italian-French enterprise. Ribbentrop traced this back to the early days of his foreign policy activities, when he also focused on France in 1933/34. Such a constellation had advantages that he had "already discussed in detail with Himmler," he explained, thereby making it clear that he did not hold an isolated opinion on this matter, but had allies. This would increase the French civilian workforce and allow for the recruitment of "a few first-class SS divisions," which was the immediate and tangible advantage he saw in the project. Ribbentrop supplemented this bait of possible military cooperation, which had already been approved by the SS leadership, with a reference to the current military situation in North Africa, where "after the establishment of a confederation of states, in which Marshal Pétain is also present, General Giraud will find it very difficult to persuade the French to fight against us." All of this together could, in Ribbentrop's view, bring the war to a political end:

> "I believe that the establishment of this alliance at the right moment will have such a lasting effect that it will effectively prevent opponents from undermining its most important principles in the future

---

Ribbentrop specifically emphasized the connection with the New Europe, which would bring freedom without paternalism to the European peoples as an institution, but did not want any public speculation about border demarcations. See *Kühnl*, Faschismus, p. 334 ff.

[17] Cf. ibid. *Chiari*, Everyday Life, p. 104.

lose the propaganda-friendly cause for war. I also believe that, given the major differences that already exist today between England, America, and Russia, and which will one day increase enormously, the enemy coalition will ultimately simply collapse in the face of such a united Europe."[18]

These plans were based on a situation that, after four years of conflict, had changed dramatically from the initial situation in 1939. The war had begun as a German-Polish dispute over relatively minor border issues. Since then, it had steadily expanded as a result of the German enemies' policy of war expansion and the German offensives, until by the summer of 1940, with the victory over France, it had brought most of Europe under German control. After the British government once again rejected any negotiations, the question arose as to how such a Europe should be politically structured in the future. Ribbentrop then drafted his concept of a continental bloc in the second half of 1940 and, together with Hitler, attempted to win France and Spain as allies in personal meetings with Pétain and Franco. This had failed, and it was doubtful, to say the least, whether conditions had improved in the two and a half years leading up to the spring of 1943. In late summer 1940, Germany and Italy faced only the British Empire, which, taken on its own, was already able to use a considerable part of the planet for warfare, even if it claimed in its propaganda that it was "alone" in stopping National Socialism. It was partly because of this British fighting spirit that both Franco and Pétain had refused at the time to be integrated into a continental bloc. They correctly recognized that the war in 1940 was by no means decided in Germany's favor. Since then, two further world powers, the USSR and the United States, had become Germany's enemies, and by the winter of 1942/43 at the latest, Germany's considerable military weaknesses had become apparent.

After all, from the perspective of March 1943, it remained unclear whether these weaknesses would continue to the point of German defeat. This uncertainty could potentially be exploited for political gain if, for example, France, Denmark, or Norway were able to secure their national sovereignty or territorial integrity by joining a confederation of states as a kind of reinsurance against the increasingly unlikely event of a German victory. The motivation for this may have varied from country to country. Marshall Pétain would hardly have signed a treaty that did not contain substantial, if not complete, guarantees for France in territorial terms. ([19])A verbal note from the French Re-

---

[18] Quoted from ADAP, E, V, Doc. 229, March 21, 1943.

[19] *Hitler* had occasionally reiterated that he did not want to claim any territory from France apart from Alsace-Lorraine, not even any raw material areas. See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 327, conversation *between Hitler and Abetz* on September 16, 1941.

At the end of 1941, the French government had also reminded Hitler of his earlier announcement
"give France an honorable place in the European confederation of states."(20) At the same time, France's intention to "assert the sovereignty of its government over the entire extent of its territory" was communicated in a friendly manner.[21]

This was also true for other countries. On top of that, the example of Poland in World War I had shown that the proclamation of states could be a political burden if it raised hopes and led to demands. On November 5, 1916, the Central Powers proclaimed a Kingdom of Poland without a head of state, without fixed borders, without an independent army, and without its own administration, which was to "develop its free forces" in "connection" with Germany and Austria.[22]The Polish national movement responded to this with demands for its own administration, weapons, and elections, while at the same time the Ukrainian national movement already rejected this symbolic Polish preference, and considerable Polish-Jewish differences arose over the question of the role of Polish Jews in the future kingdom. The result was a political knot of interests that German policy between 1916 and 1918 was unable to untangle. Ribbentrop may have known this. Without precise commitments, hardly any government of the prestigious confederation members from Western and Northern Europe would be persuaded to sign an agreement that obviously only benefited the National Socialist German Reich. Even with precise commitments, the effects would not be such that opponents or occupied territories would be transformed into full allies. At best, the European confederation could indirectly achieve the political effects outlined and perhaps the ones Himmler expected.
"a few SS divisions." In his memoirs, Ribbentrop declared further speculation to be unrealistic:

> "The assertion often made today that it would have been possible to turn countries such as France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Serbia, Greece, Poland, and the occupied Russian territories into political factors in our warfare or even into fighting allies is utopian. The national dynamics of these states were far too strong and too deeply rooted in tradition, and their belief in a German victory was far too weak from the outset."(23)

However, the foreign minister felt that he could not expect his head of state to accept these insights in 1943. He tried with brusque internal

---

20 Cf. ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 531, p. 756 ff., Verbal note from the French government dated 1. December 1941.

21 Cf. ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 531, p. 758.

22 Cf. *Strazhas*, Ostpolitik, p. 135.

23 Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 258 f. This was an idea that *Ribbentrop* had already expressed in conversation with *Antonescu*. See transcript of *the Ribbentrop-Antonescu* conversation of August 7, 1944, ADAP, E, VIII, Doc. 149, p. 286 f. As an example, he cited a petition by French "collaborationists" who, in 1942, when Germany was at the Volga, had protested against the incorporation of Alsace-Lorraine.

socialist jargon to make an impression: "The question of the territorial demarcation of the various states should not be dealt with in the founding act," he said, referring to the "right tough people" who were to be deployed in "possible state structures" – presumably in the envisaged Eastern European territories: "Then the founding of the Greater Germanic Reich at the end of the war will be a matter of course." Ribbentrop concluded with an appeal to the phrase often invoked by Hitler himself, that such a project would "save a lot of German blood."

The accompanying draft founding document comprised eight points. These included a mutual guarantee of "freedom and political independence" by the signatory states, which were defined as "sovereign," as well as a declaration of intent to conclude a joint defensive alliance, the details of which were still to be determined, and a declaration on the abolition of customs barriers. Another point addressed the cultural exchange typical of Ribbentrop, who was already active in cultural policy in England, while preserving
"ethnic identity." All details were to be laid down in a federal act, which was to be negotiated after the war by "representatives of all participating governments."

In preparation for such negotiations, Ribbentrop established a "European Committee" on April 5, 1943, which was to work confidentially and without the knowledge of other Reich authorities. It was divided into three specialist groups: European propaganda (headed by Schmidt "Presse," later "Paul Carrell"), European law (headed by von Rintelen), and history, geography, and statistics of earlier European unions and current conditions, headed by Fritz Berber. Ribbentrop's general instructions once again emphasized the provisional nature of the situation and the need for differentiation. The Foreign Office was expressly not to draw up a plan that could be applied to all European countries. In his instructions to the committee, Ribbentrop changed the "Greater Germanic" Reich, whose foundation he had promised Hitler after the war, to "Greater Germany," which was apparently no coincidence but indicated a political difference. This Germany was to have "supremacy" in Europe after the war, but a rule with limits:

> "It must be assumed that in the future, Greater Germany's relations with individual European countries will be either close or loose and cannot be defined according to a consistent pattern. Each country and people must be considered individually.

---

[24]In his memoirs, he stated that he had only been informed of *Hitler's* plans for a "Greater Germanic Reich" through "hearsay," i.e., not by *Hitler* himself. It was not clear how serious such plans were. *Hitler* was aware of his intentions to limit (Greater) German aspirations in Europe and perhaps kept him out of certain plans for that reason. "Only *Himmler* attended the receptions of certain 'Germanic' personalities." Quoted from *Ribbentrop,* Memoirs, p. 258.

A special decision must be made. ... Furthermore, the complicated situation and national structure of Europe do not allow for uniform regulations to be established for all countries."[25]

According to these guidelines, Ribbentrop wanted the Foreign Office to work out certain plans in complete secrecy, which would be presented if military developments went well. For the time being, both the agency and the minister were too isolated within the regime to be able to act openly. The committee was therefore to meet in confidence. It is not clear whether Hitler approved this in order to keep his options open. A few days after taking note of Ribbentrop's memorandum on Europe, he granted his foreign minister a tax-free endowment of half a million Reichsmarks for the first time since 1939, effective April 30, 1943. However, this was less for political reasons and more to mark Ribbentrop's 50th birthday. The statements Hitler himself made to the party leadership at that time on European policy sounded very different from Ribbentrop's proposals. He attributed the defeats in Stalingrad and the impending defeat in North Africa to the failure of the allies. Either he had moved far away from the idea of confederations of states, or he considered the idea so defeatist that he could not express it to the leading National Socialists.

On May 8, 1943, five weeks after Ribbentrop's European plan and exactly two years before the surrender of the German armed forces, the Reich and Gauleiters of the NSDAP were sworn in by Hitler at a meeting in Berlin to the opposite of what Ribbentrop had drafted. Hitler did not spare any historical analogies to suggest to the audience that, in addition to a
"Greater Germanic Reich," he would not allow any other European "state debris" to exist. He cited the protection of Europe and its "core" from further wars as his main motive:

"We cannot wage war at the core. The goal for Russia is the Urals. Charlemagne did nothing else but found the Ostmark to protect ...

Organization of the West, our historical task, to organize primitive peoples as a glacis in front of us. For Europe beckons the East. Commitment to this task. Judaism must be eradicated in Europe. Anything that opposes this must fall. Compromise solution offered in 1932, rejected. Was important. The fight must be fought through. Hungary class divide unbridgeable. Misfortune Duce. No associations similar to the SS (M associations wrong Jäger).

Now never again Verb (probably meaning "associations," author's note) in the East; Europe can only be protected by a Greater Germanic state. [26]

---

[25] *Ribbentrop's* decree of April 5, 1943.

[26] BA N 1075/5, Handwritten notes by State Secretary *Backe*, who was present, on the itinerary of his own trip to Italy from May 3 to 7, 1943.

At this point, control over Eastern Europe initially had primarily strategic significance in Hitler's thinking. The formation of states in Eastern Europe, as Ribbentrop had also brought up in his plan for Europe, thus served defensive purposes. The fact that in Hitler's thinking this involved
"primitive peoples" ruled out the possibility of winning them over as allies. The idea was to establish a German imperialism in which Eastern Europe would serve as a military buffer zone and sphere of economic influence. On the other hand, on that day, the Eastern Europeans shared this disparaging classification with the actual active German allies of 1943. Hitler distanced himself from rational foreign policy and at the same time wanted to lead the NSDAP on a radically anti-Semitic course:

> "Fundamentally, we must return to old anti-Semitic slogans. The entire war is an anti-Semitic war. In Germany, the Jewish question must be resolved clearly, only then will there be no revolutions, this danger in Hungary, Italy, Romania. State debris must be removed. The only hand to organize this is Germany, the sword hand. ... In the long run, only Germans in the armed forces."(27)

Some of those present may have remembered from reading Mein Kampf that Hitler had already described the allies of the Wilhelmine Empire as "rubbish doomed to destruction."[28] After these and other previous statements about the extermination of the Jews, the Reich and Gau leaders must also have at least suspected what fate awaited the Jews deported to Eastern Europe or what they had already suffered. Hitler appealed to history, which allegedly permitted such methods:

> Were the electors, etc., aware of the significance of their creation? One must not complain about methods then. Charlemagne. Did not foresee that Bra (sic – Brandenburg?) would become. But basis for formation of empire. Methods? Hitler also determined to liberate homeland. Thus slaughterer of Austria, if it had come to battle.
>
> Thoughts and methods. They must lead to the goal. Charlemagne also only did what we must do today: protect the East. New giant Ostmar (sic, probably meaning Ostmark, author's note) like all before the Magyars. To protect the core."[29]

It was a long way from the foreign policy beginnings of 1933 to this point in May 1943. In a sense, it was a circle that had closed. In many places, and quite credibly, Hitler, the head of state, had intellectually and politically overcome the Lebensraum imperialism he had developed in his early programmatic writings before taking office, to which he returned on this day. He had also pursued this line before and during the...

---

[27] BA N 1075/5, *Backes'* handwritten notes on the itinerary for the trip to Italy from May 3 to 7, 1943.

[28] Quoted from *Hitler*, Mein Kampf, p. 745.

[29] BA N 1075/5, Handwritten note *by Herbert Backes* on the itinerary for the trip to Italy from May 3 to 7, 1943.

World War II, at least until the failed summit talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov in November 1940. Operation Barbarossa took place because of the aggressive threat posed by Soviet foreign and military policy, which Molotov made clear on this occasion in Berlin, not because of Hitler's journalistic pronouncements in the 1920s. Joachim von Ribbentrop, whom he had made head of his foreign policy, had consequently attempted on numerous occasions, with Hitler's approval, to put the Third Reich in a position acceptable to the rest of the world in terms of its foreign policy environment. His plan for Europe also bore this hallmark, while Hitler now used drastically different language in his communications with the Reich and Gau leaders:

> "But the hostile world must be destroyed. Insensitive to feelings for Jews. Opponents of German blood, etc. But no pity for Judaism. Anti-Semitic movements in other countries. No excuse for those who do not defend themselves against Jews. Life is cruel, poaching. (sic) We are not inventors, but victims of this world. Opponents who cannot be controlled must be destroyed. Germany will one day rule all of Europe, and whoever rules Europe will one day rule the whole world. Not to exploit, but to create cultural values"([30]

Deriving a license to commit atrocities without restraint from the role of "victim of this world" meant a categorical rejection of all morality, since every form of morality recognizes the difference between what is and what ought to be and is based on this knowledge. This does not need to be emphasized or elaborated upon. There are other statements by Hitler in this vein, but also some that remained consistent with his intentions as expressed in 1936–39. Ultimately, the path to this form of radicalism was open because the main opponents of the war coalition had rejected any negotiations since 1939 and had ultimately publicly rejected any foreign policy. According to Winston Churchill, their demand for "unconditional surrender" was a demand for free disposal of land, people, and lives([31]) and thus a demand for authorization to do things that can also be readily described as ruthless mass crimes. For German foreign policy and for Ribbentrop, such mutual radicalism meant that Hitler, for his part, opposed any political compromise. Even an intervention by the foreign minister on church and Jewish policy and "a relatively calm discussion" about it, as reported by Ribbentrop, did nothing to change this:

> "Nevertheless, I presented all the arguments that could demonstrate how much our situation in the war, which had become so much more difficult in the meantime, could be alleviated by peace in the ideological sphere. Hitler's response was: 'That is a complete misapprehension...'

---

[30] BA N 1075/5, *Backes'* handwritten note on a menu card from his trip to Italy on May 5, 1943, quoted here from a transcript BA.

[31] Cf. *Kettenacker*, Friedenssicherung, p. 496.

recognition of the problem and a naive view. This war is an ideological war between the Jewish-Bolshevik and the national world, and this struggle cannot be won by foreign policy means, but must be decided by weapons."[32]

This made foreign and European policy virtually impossible. However, in public, things mostly continued as before. At the same time as Hitler's speech to the Reich and Gau leaders, Goebbels published an article in the weekly newspaper Das Reich entitled "The War and the Jews," which displayed a similarly crude anti-Semitic tendency as Hitler's speech. In it, Goebbels called the war a Jewish war, claimed the existence of Jewish plans to exterminate Germany, and quite clearly hinted at the real Nazi policy of extermination against the Jews. Compassion was out of place. Hitler had placed himself above the propaganda minister with his statements. This remained an exception. The annual edition of "Das Reich" was surprisingly unexciting overall, but it did pick up on events such as the British policy of starvation in India, which claimed millions of victims, and with such reports, of course, intentionally or unintentionally prepared the ground for further moral numbness. However, in keeping with Ribbentrop's thinking, Kurt von Raumer([33])outlined the details in the same newspaper under the title "Stages of Unity – German and European Core Formation." Raumer took up one of Ribbentrop's core ideas: Europe had to be "accustomed" to Germany's existence. What Bismarck had done in 1871, when no one expected it, namely to regard Germany as a saturated state and to renounce further expansion, now had to be accomplished by the current Germany in an expanded "Greater German" sense. Raumer's article claimed German leadership in a Europe with a common "European consciousness," but he clearly called for the renunciation of the violent occupation of such a claim to leadership:

We know that such a development (just like the unified development of a people) cannot be 'made', but rather can only grow out of the maturity of a historic moment and out of a voluntary spirit that recognizes it and carries out its mission. But we also know that this mission gives us a special responsibility and that the European and German destiny to which we have devoted ourselves represents today, as ever, an indissoluble unity."([34])

Raumer invoked the continuity of history in a completely different way. The path to a return to politics was still open, at least in journalism.

---

[32] Quoted from *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 275.

[33] *Kurt von Raumer* (1900–1982), German historian, member of the Freikorps in 1919, habilitated in 1928, took over *Hans Rothfels'* former Königsberg chair in 1939, whom *Ribbentrop* had supported in remaining in office in 1934.

[34] *Raumer* in Das Reich 27/1943, July 4, 1943.

Ribbentrop did not leave this field untouched either, having already made an attempt in August 1939 to bring together Germany's intellectual minds in a think tank. The aim was ultimately to improve German policy on Europe, at that time still with a view to doing so under peaceful conditions and as a countermeasure to the ongoing media preparations for war by the other side. Among others, Friedrich Sieburg, Carl-Erdmann Graf von Pückler-Branitz, Giselher Wirsing, Max Gross, and Ernst Jünger were flown to Fuschl Castle, where Ribbentrop personally gave a lecture on the critical foreign policy situation.[35]Among other things, it was discussed that the invitees could choose a correspondent post of their choice and should preferably telephone the Foreign Office to report on their experiences and suggestions there, [36]which probably meant that they would be able to speak to the minister himself. Many agreed, and Gross, Wirsing, and Sieburg in particular were actually given such positions and published a great deal during the war years, much of which contained subtle and thought-provoking ideas and observations on the events of the time.[37]Ernst Jünger, on the other hand, continued to maintain his distanced but not harshly oppositional stance toward the regime, as he had since 1933, and declined the offer. After all, just weeks earlier he had published his fantastic novel "Auf den Marmorklippen" (On the Marble Cliffs), which some considered to be the most outspoken critique of the regime printed during the Nazi era in Germany. Jünger himself did not think much of such simplistic assessments of his literary intentions, and he stuck to this view even after the war. For him, The Marble Cliffs was art with timeless substance that had become political at most unconsciously, as he noted in retrospect on his visit to Ribbentrop:

> "I returned to Kirchhorst feeling somewhat reassured, believing that a game of poker was being played. That was probably the intention. The *fact* that I knew better is proven by the text of 'Auf den Marmorklippen' (On the Marble Cliffs), which preoccupied me at the time. This story belongs less to the realm of literature than to that of Vi-

---

[35] Cf. *Jünger*, Annäherungen, p. 394.

[36] According to a letter *from Jünger* to *Rudolf von Ribbentrop*. Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Erlebnisse, P. 55 f. In his letter, *Jünger* also mentions the French intellectual *Drieu La Rochelle,* who had advocated for a federal Europe in his 1928 book Geneve ou Moscou and who also promoted Ribbentrop-style plans for Europe during the war. See *Ray*, Abetz, p. 81.

[37]*Sieburg* had already dealt with the "Röhm Putsch" in a remarkable way when he wrote a biography of the French revolutionary *Robbespierre* in 1935. It could be read – at times with little euphemism – as a portrayal of the Nazi regime and the German head of government, whose own principles and personal modesty, combined with a lack of human ties and moderation, drove him to ever greater radicalization: "Death is initially a punishment, but soon it becomes a political tool. First, it is supposed to punish those who break the law, but the time is near when it will exterminate all those who do not belong to the people." See *Sieburg,* Robbespierre, p. 146.

commissions – as an example of what we in Westphalia and also here in Lower Saxony call 'pre-burn'."[38]

The world of "Marmorklippen" ultimately succumbs to war and destruction, which plans and calculations, assassinations, and individual bravery cannot change. This corresponded to Jünger's view of historical development, which he had developed during World War I and processed in his diary publication "In Stahlgewittern" (Storm of Steel). War had no political function in this view. It was a natural phenomenon that had no actual political causes, consumed all meaning "with which one had once set out," and could not be understood within the framework of "Poker playing" was to be curbed. This was a perspective that went beyond interpretations of the World War era as a global civil war of ideologies, an age of warring states, the final phase of the imperialist era, or an ordinary, albeit exceptionally extensive, war of chance. It included the accurate observation that, despite all their sophistication, the players in the diplomatic game ultimately could not know the historical context in which they were operating. Within the framework of Ribbentrop's correspondent project, Jünger would certainly have contributed something that would have eluded any political interpretation.

2. Stockholm peace contacts

The rumors about peace talks between the USSR and the German Reich in 1943 were investigated extensively after 1945. Stalin had agreed with England not to conclude a separate peace or armistice; he was contractually bound in this regard. However, the long years during which Stalin dictated Soviet foreign policy were also marked by a long chain of broken treaties. It should be noted that intergovernmental treaties had no binding value for Stalin. Concluding an armistice with Germany was a matter of political expediency for him. The time may have come when Germany was threatening to become weak, and he had, after all, made it clear to Ribbentrop in 1939, in no uncertain terms and somewhat condescendingly, that he would not tolerate this.[39] Perhaps he also remembered that he had not originally intended to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the Western powers. In this context, the threat of a special German-Russian peace was the natural response to the Allies' unwillingness to deploy a significant number of troops on any front compared to the USSR. In the summer of 1942, Ribbentrop received several reports from German embassies that made this connection and even claimed that Molotov had accepted a "certain German offer."

---

[38] Quoted from *Jünger*, Approaches, p. 394 f.
[39] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 206.

threatened. [40]A week later, Ribbentrop also made this connection to the Japanese ambassador and spoke of Stalin's special peace propaganda to exert pressure on the Allies. On the other hand, he simultaneously asked Oshima to convey the message to Tokyo that a special peace with the USSR would be impossible for Germany because Stalin could not accept the German conditions.[41] This could hardly be interpreted as anything other than a clear signal to Moscow, to be relayed via Tokyo, that Germany was prepared to make peace, provided the conditions were right.

As 1942 drew to a close, the Soviets contacted Peter Kleist, a German diplomat and member of Ribbentrop's staff. During a conversation in Stockholm, Kleist received an offer from a Mr. Edgar Clauß:

> "I guarantee you that if Germany agrees to the borders of 1939, you can have peace in eight days."[42]

Clauß justified this offer by citing the lack of a second front for the Allies and the options available to the USSR in Asia, which Moscow allegedly wanted to pursue once the German-Soviet war had been settled. In retrospect, writing after the war, Kleist naturally regarded this as a great missed opportunity. Chronologically, it was still before the German defeat at Stalingrad, which was looming but not yet clearly discernible. The German armed forces had not yet suffered a decisive defeat and, according to these ideas, were still supposed to vacate all the territory they had conquered in the USSR as if nothing had happened since June 22, 1941. In terms of content, this could only be a first provocative negotiating demand,[43] which, as a signal, at least hinted at the possibility in principle of a kind of armistice between the two states, especially since Clauß, when asked, claimed to have detailed knowledge of Kremlin internal affairs and

---

[40] PA AA, Ritter's files on Russia, telegram from Santiago dated August 22, 1942, here according to *Fleischhauer*, Gespräche, p. 92.

[41] See ADAP, E, III, Doc. 255, p. 435.

[42] Quoted from *Kleist*, Tragedy, 183. According to *Kleist*, the conversation took place on December 14, 1942. Even in 2011, historians still rely primarily on these accounts from the memoirs, as the Russian archives remain inaccessible. This applies even to work on semi-official publications such as the three-volume edition Die UdSSR und die deutsche Frage 1941–1948 (The USSR and the German Question 1941–1948), which brings together documents from the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Archive. Here, too, the German editors were not even given access to the finding aid, which is part of the everyday scandal of historiography on the Second World War. See *Laufer,* Dokumente, p. IX. This finding is complemented by the fact that the obstruction of free research does not prevent strong judgments. For example, the editors were unable to find out anything about Kleist's meeting, but ultimately question it in the notes as "unlikely" without giving any reasons or referring to *Kleist*'s, *Ribbentrop's*, or *Semjonov's* accounts. See *Laufer,* Dokumente, p. 646 f.

[43] The Washington Office of Strategic Services also received a report that *Molotov* had offered peace in November 1942 via a special envoy in exchange for Germany's withdrawal from Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. See *Fleischhauer*, Gespräche, p. 303.

which informed the German-Soviet negotiations led by Ribbentrop in 1939.

According to Kleist's account, he immediately informed Ribbentrop about this first Russian attempt to make contact, as well as Count Schulenburg, the former ambassador to Moscow, and Adam von Trott zu Solz. [44] Everyone found this news promising, and Ribbentrop made an attempt to persuade Hitler to enter into negotiations. A few weeks earlier, the Allies had landed in North Africa. Against this backdrop, Ribbentrop requested "immediate authorization to establish contact with Stalin via the Soviet ambassador in Stockholm, Madame Kollontay, with a view to concluding a peace agreement – if necessary, by surrendering most of the territory conquered in the East."[45] This elicited nothing more than an immediate outburst of rage from Germany's tyrant, which only subsided months later after the defeat at Stalingrad, when Hitler was no longer fundamentally opposed to agreeing to a compromise with the USSR under certain conditions. [46] However, he was unable to move beyond this position over the next two years.

It was not until June 1943 that Kleist traveled to Sweden again, met Clauß once more, and this time was offered a specific and imminent meeting with a Soviet diplomat known to him, a Mr. Alexandrov. When asked, Clauß cited the USSR's long-term goals in Asia, particularly in China, which were difficult to achieve after a long conflict with Germany, as the reason for the Soviets' fundamental desire for contact. Kleist leaves open in his account whether he would have conveyed this desire for contact to Ribbentrop this time, but in any case it was no longer in his hands, as he was arrested after his return to Berlin. The SS security service had received news of the talks, and its chief, Kaltenbrunner, personally conducted the interrogation of Kleist. Kaltenbrunner also did not consider it appropriate to have the foreign minister immediately informed of the situation by Kleist, but instead placed Kleist under house arrest, which incidentally illustrates the domestic political conditions under which Ribbentrop had to operate in 1943. Kaltenbrunner agreed to pass on the information himself, and two months later Ribbentrop managed, under conspiratorial circumstances, to invite Kleist to his official residence in East Prussia to speak to him personally and be briefed for four hours. Ribbentrop reacted immediately and reported the matter to Hitler on the same day, who had been informed by the SS that Clauß and Alexandrow were "Jews"([47]).

---

[44] Cf. *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 184.

[45] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 262.

[46] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 264.

[47] *Semjonov* also claims this with regard to *Clauß*. See *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 138. In fact, *Clauß* was a Protestant of Jewish descent, born in Riga in 1879 and socialized in Germany. After the first Russian Revolution in 1905, he had invested his fortune in

who would issue "ultimatums" in Stockholm. The result was at least the assignment to Kleist to take care of reestablishing contact and the long-overdue meeting. This actually succeeded in September 1943, if Kleist is to be believed.

Ribbentrop's memoirs describe this episode somewhat differently. Ribbentrop writes that he had contacted Ambassador Kollontay in Stockholm "through my liaison officer Kleist," thus attributing the initiative to Germany and himself personally.[48] This is confirmed by the account of Vladimir Semjonov, who, after his aforementioned preparations in Berlin "in case the Red Army ever came to Germany," was now serving at the Soviet embassy in Stockholm and represented the ailing old revolutionary Kollontay in this matter.[49] Clauß was therefore a German-Soviet double agent and did indeed speak to Kleist on December 6, 1942. Ribbentrop also confirms a "new, very energetic initiative" in September 1943, which he had undertaken with Hitler, who then actually showed a demarcation line on the map that he could agree on with the Soviets.[50] Kleist, at any rate, states that he made contact again in Stockholm in September 1943, and Semjonov also confirms this. [51] Ribbentrop attempted to reach an agreement with the Soviets.

In the meantime, conditions for Germany had deteriorated. The Soviet side no longer demanded the borders of 1939 as a starting point for negotiations, but those of 1914, i.e., the whole of Poland. In addition, there were
"All of Asia," meaning the termination of German support for Japan, and in addition the "straits," i.e., those bases in Denmark and Turkey that Molotov had already demanded in Berlin in November 1940, when Germany was close to the peak of its military successes.[52] This, of course, gave a foretaste of the demands that would be made once the Red Army, if these things were conceded, was just a few hundred kilometers from Berlin. Germany would then be in a most likely protracted war with the Western powers in the old – i.e., pre-June 1941

---

acquired through real estate speculation with German-Baltic land holdings, which were sold off on a large scale at the time, had been deported to the interior of Russia during the war as a potential German collaborator and had since appeared in various nationalities and functions in international affairs. See *Fleischhauer*, Conversations, p. 30 ff.

[48] Cf. *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 264.

[49] Cf. *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 137 ff. Sem*jonov's* assertion that *Kleist* had even brought up the 1937 borders on his own initiative in December 1942 can probably be attributed to the atmosphere of the post-war period, when *Semjonov* played a leading role in Soviet policy toward Germany for decades in both the FRG and the GDR, and the "borders of 1937" were a popular slogan in German policy.

[50] See *Ribbentrop*, Memoirs, p. 264.

[51] Cf. *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 141.

[52] Cf. *Kleist*, Tragedy, p. 199.

existing – dependent on Soviet supplies and once again at the mercy of Soviet military threats. By this time, virtually the entire world economy was working for the Allied war effort. This applied to raw materials as well as finished products and labor. Even the ever-new troop units fielded by the USSR could only be assembled because of the large number of foreign "volunteers" who took their places in Soviet factories. On October 3, 1943, Ribbentrop presented Japanese Ambassador Oshima with a confidential defense report stating that the Soviets had withdrawn one million men from the Far East, while the Asian parts of the USSR were now "flooded" with foreign workers from Persia, India, and China.

Based on all previous experience, a German-Soviet armistice would therefore result in ever new and ever increasing Soviet demands. Reports to this effect were already coming in from various sources. Franz von Papen, the ambassador in Ankara, was said to have been presented with a list of Soviet demands that divided Poland along the 1939 borders but claimed the entire Black Sea coast, parts of northern Greece including Thessaloniki, and a port on the Adriatic Sea for the USSR, i.e., the entire Balkans and thus also Romanian oil.[54]Paul Schmidt, whom Ribbentrop had also sent on a mission to Stockholm, had already reported Russian demands for East Prussia and Upper Silesia to "compensate" for Poland's losses. He also mentioned "free rein in the Balkans" as a Soviet condition, the cession of parts of Italy such as Trieste and Fiume, and a Pan-Slavic confederation including a renewed Czechoslovakia. ([55])

This catalog led back to the core issue, namely the question of why the German-Soviet war had broken out in the first place. Given their behavior between 1939 and 1941, the Soviets could offer no credible guarantee that they would not resume their policy of hostility toward Germany at the first opportunity, with the old goal of Sovietizing Germany. Their goals, their demands, their breaches of treaty, their blackmailing maneuvers, and finally their threatening military attack had made this war inevitable. If the underlying intention remained unchanged, any new agreement would only be a ceasefire, and probably a short one at that. However, it was obviously pointless to hand over several hundred thousand square kilometers of land to the Red Army and then face them again at the new border. Under these circumstances, the only chance for an agreement beneficial to Germany would be a comprehensive demilitarization of the evacuated territories for the duration of the war and their

---

[53] Cf. *Martin*, Germany, p. 186, *Martin* refers to PA AA Handakten Schmidt, record of the RAM-Oshima meeting on October 3, 1943, in Steinort.

[54] Cf. *Fleischhauer*, Conversations, p. 116.

[55] Cf. *Fleischhauer*, Gespräche, p. 159.

further unhindered economic exploitation could continue. This idea was apparently based on a single piece of information that arrived at the Foreign Office from the Italian embassy in Helsinki on August 1, 1942. It claimed that Stalin would immediately make peace if German troops withdrew to the 1939 border and, in return, he would withdraw his troops behind the Volga.[56]

Although neither Peter Kleist nor Ribbentrop mention anything about this in their records, there are several other accounts of conversations between Ribbentrop and the Soviet leadership in 1943 that are independent of their reports. According to German officers involved, Ribbentrop is said to have met personally with Vyacheslav Molotov on the German-Soviet front line in Kirovograd in June 1943 and, on Hitler's behalf, offered to withdraw German troops to a line on the Dnieper River. However, Molotov insisted on a retreat to the 1939 border, which would correspond to Kleist's account. (57) This led to the failure of the talks. Friedrich von Schlabrendorff, on the other hand, reported on a meeting between Ribbentrop and Molotov in March 1943 in Molodetschno, where Ribbentrop is said to have proposed the Vilnius-Odessa line as a new demarcation line, which would have come very close to a retreat to the 1939 border, but which was nevertheless rejected. The origin of all these rumors is difficult to trace. (59) Ribbentrop would certainly have mentioned such a meeting in the postwar period or recorded it in his memoirs if it had taken place. Instead, he writes that no Soviet negotiator appeared at the meeting finally agreed upon with Kleist in 1944, which may refer to the summer of 1944. According to some sources, on June 22, Kleist may have met with representatives of the Soviet embassy in Stockholm on Ribbentrop's behalf, this time with Vladimir Semjonov himself and a Mr. Nikituschev.[60] However, Semjonov denies this in his memoirs. He does, however, mention a query from the Soviet Foreign Ministry as to whether the reports from the Stockholm embassy had been correctly understood and whether Semjonov really had had no personal contacts with Kleist. [61] So this was considered quite conceivable in Moscow. Semjonov's original assignment had therefore not ruled it out.

---

[56] PA AA Note from *Woermann* dated August 1, 1942, here cited in *Fleischhauer*, Conversations, p. 141.

[57] Cf. *Liddell Hart*, Weltkrieg, p. 610.

[58] *F. v. Schlabrendorff* in: *Kettenacker*, Deutschland, p. 95, here n. *Michalka*, Ribbentrop, p. 292.

[59] During the Nuremberg trials, *Albert Speer* spread third-hand rumors that *Walter Hewel* had spread rumors about negotiations "from the summer of 1944" on *Hitler's* behalf, including one about the presence of a Soviet diplomat who had previously worked in Berlin in Stockholm. In doing so, he served the Soviet Union's need to deny these contacts after the fact. See IMT, XVI, p. 553.

[60] See *Fleischhauer*, Sonderfrieden, p. 244. See *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 146 f.

[61] See *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 147.

It is likely that many of these contemporary rumors were deliberately circulated by several parties, if only to motivate the respective populations to persevere with the prospect of peace. There were also rumors regarding Ribbentrop's negotiations with the Western powers. In January 1944, Pravda reported that Ribbentrop was negotiating a separate peace with the Western powers at an undisclosed location on the Spanish peninsula.[62] This was also untrue. However, it was a deliberate "move" by Moscow in response to Germany's requests for contact, which it rightly considered to be centrally directed. [63] It is not entirely clear what this response was intended to achieve other than an intensification of contacts. Overall, however, attempts at contact between the warring parties could not change the fundamental political differences, which had been considerably exacerbated by the dynamics of the war. Before September 1, 1939, and before June 22, 1941, all the combinations that were on the table in 1943/44 had already been tried and had already failed at that time. Ribbentrop had not succeeded in deterring the Western powers from declaring war, as he had feared, and the National Socialists as a whole had not succeeded in permanently neutralizing the USSR or even winning it as an ally. The military situation had deteriorated significantly since then, reducing the political leeway for a German nation-state on a par with the great powers on the other side.

At least Stalin did not fail to use nuance. So when he formally endorsed the formula of Germany's "unconditional surrender" proclaimed at the Casablanca Conference in a daily order on May 1, 1943, he also argued at the Tehran Conference for setting concrete conditions for the Germans, which was precisely what Churchill and Roosevelt wanted to avoid with their formula.

Diplomatic rumors about German-Russian talks in 1943 spread far and wide. A year later, Ribbentrop still had to listen to clear accusations from Antonescu:

> "He must tell Mr. RAM that they had received information that Germany had negotiated with Russia via Japan last year, and that he also had reports that Mr. RAM had met with the Russians in Helsinki. It was also known that Mr. Kleist was visiting the Russian legation in Stockholm and that discussions had already taken place there about Dobruja and Bessarabia"(65)

---

62 Cf. *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 11, p. 110 f., entry dated January 18, 1944.

63 Cf. *Semjonov*, Mission, p. 144 f.

64 Cf. *Hansen*, Ende, p. 23.

65 Recording of the conversation *between Ribbentrop and Antonescu* on August 7, 1944, cited in ADAP, E, VIII, Doc. 149, p. 279 f.

Like all smaller states of that era, the Romanian dictator feared, not without reason, that his country could become the subject of a power-political deal, which had already happened through Ribbentrop himself, both in the German-Soviet Agreement on Mutual Assistance of 1939 and in the Vienna Arbitration Award. On the other hand, however, Romania, from Germany's point of view, enjoyed comprehensive protection against further Russian claims, precisely because it was in Germany's own interest.

The rumors of peace and the background discussions about a possible peace were naturally fueled by Italy's switch to the opposing side. According to Bernd Martin, Goebbels and Ribbentrop are said to have considered a compromise with the USSR in the context of this move, in talks that are documented in Goebbels' diaries on September 10, 1943, and September 23, 1943. Hitler allegedly rejected negotiations and speculated on the annexation of Corsica and Sardinia by England, which the British might be more willing to accept in exchange for this booty. ([66])The background to these anachronistic statements was apparently international press rumors about such conquest plans, which Anthony Eden even denied before Parliament a few days later. ([67])

After all, the question of a separate peace with Stalin was repeatedly raised in talks between Japan and Germany. A year later, when Japanese Ambassador Oshima inquired about this possibility, Hitler did not rule it out from his side. However, there was obviously no particular hope for such a peace. Ribbentrop, who was also present at the meeting with Oshima, summarized Hitler's view in a note to the German Embassy in Japan:

> "a) We have no indication whatsoever that the Soviet government is prepared to reach an agreement with Germany. In our opinion, Stalin will only attempt to reach an agreement with Germany once he is convinced that he can no longer fight successfully or that his forces are in any case insufficient to defeat Germany.
>
> b) If these conditions were met by Stalin, it would become apparent, a new political situation would arise, and then we would see what needed to be done.
>
> c) We therefore ask the Japanese government to continue to refrain from taking any steps in this regard with the Soviet government."[68]

This was roughly in line with what Ribbentrop himself had reported Hitler saying to him, that one did not have to touch a red-hot stove to

---

[66] Cf. *Martin*, Deutschland, p. 184.

[67] Cf. *Goebbels*, Diaries, II/9, p. 559, September 23, 1943.

[68] *Ribbentrop* to the Embassy in Tokyo, September 6, 1944, cited in ADAP, E, VIII, Doc. 223, p. 429.

p. 429.

to determine that it was hot. The USSR was at the height of its war readiness. The heavy losses of 1941 had been more than compensated for by its own arms production and, increasingly, by deliveries from the USA. Just how much this had shifted the balance of power on the battlefield to the detriment of the German side had been demonstrated a few weeks before this news by the failure of the German summer offensive of 1943, Operation Citadel. Ribbentrop was able to learn this from within his own family. His eldest son Rudolf was killed in the
On July 12, 1943, as commander of a small tank group of seven vehicles near the town of Prokhorovka, he engaged in battle with over a hundred Soviet tanks, all of which were destroyed with only two of his own vehicles lost. Of course, this was not something that could be repeated constantly, and even this success and the heavy Soviet losses elsewhere did not change the fact that the fighting ultimately ended in a German defeat and retreat. In the summer and fall of 1943, Stalin could assume that he would ultimately be able to defeat the German forces if conditions remained roughly the same, i.e., if the Soviet Union remained politically stable and increasingly gained the upper hand in the arms sector. This had foreign policy consequences for Germany's ability to negotiate, which was even more limited than it already was. The classic responsibilities of the foreign minister lay dormant.

3. Goebbels vs. Ribbentrop

The year 1944 also brought a clearly discernible rapprochement, or rather, a mutual engagement between Ribbentrop and Joseph Goebbels, who had previously been embroiled in years of disputes over politics and competences and had little positive contact with each other. This form of constant conflict could be considered a textbook example of the petty warfare that the ministries waged against each other, which Ribbentrop pursued with energetic but not always effective commitment, as Paul Schmidt Carrell describes:

> "Most of the time he was objectively right, but he almost always ruined his position by his dogmatism in small matters and his impersonal, hurtful methods. The main source of contention was Goebbels and his ministry. Here, notes were exchanged as between enemy states, letters written with a sophisticated thirst for insult. Treaties were concluded and then broken by both sides, and it was part of the entertainment for the officials to keep each other informed about the state of the battle for competence."([69])

The partial rapprochement of 1944 was reflected in numerous entries in Goebbels' diaries, in which Ribbentrop, despite or

---

[69] Quoted from *Schmidt*, Diary, draft biography from August 1947, p. 19.

due to the ongoing conflict in previous years, had hardly occurred at times. [70] Meanwhile, the regime and the nation had their backs against the wall. Goebbels had already made the unspeakable public in articles in the weekly newspaper Das Reich, reminding the Western Allies of the consequences of a "defeat of the Reich by Bolshevism."Ribbentrop considered this too disadvantageous a sign of weakness in view of the rapidly advancing Red Army, whose pace at the time did indeed make an occupation of Germany in the fall of 1944 seem likely. If the corresponding entry in Goebbels' diary is to be believed, Ribbentrop still hoped that Stalin was a "sober realist" who,
"if there is no other way for him to deal with the British and Americans, ... he would undoubtedly be prepared to join forces with us," but only if the front line remained unchanged. [72] This echoed Ribbentrop's recollection of Stalin's statement to him when the treaty was signed in 1939: he would not tolerate Germany becoming too weak. At that time, the Kremlin leader had, consciously or unconsciously, made the current balance of power crystal clear and indirectly expressed his true opinion that Germany would eventually become dependent on Soviet goodwill in a conflict with the Western powers. From the perspective of the summer of 1944, such assessments slowly but surely crystallized into the last foreign policy trump card that the German Reich might still be able to play: it still had the relative freedom to decide whether it wanted to fall prey to the East or the West.

In both cases, the vision of an independent superpower role would come to an end; at best, the damage to the national substance could possibly be limited in this way. The plans for division, expulsion, destruction, and re-education drawn up by the various planning agencies in the victorious powers were still in the drawer. From the perspective at the time, it was much less clear which side Germany might choose in an extreme case than it appears in retrospect. The West, which would ultimately receive the larger and economically more significant part of German territory, had publicly advocated and also carried out widespread mass killings of the German population during the war. Hundreds of thousands of German civilians fell victim to the Western bombing campaign, which reached its peak in the spring of 1945 and became increasingly bloody as German defensive capabilities declined and British-American offensive capabilities increased. Every German civilian vehicle had to expect to be attacked by aircraft.

---

[70] Of course, this did not mean that these entries were entirely positive. On August 3, *Goebbels* described *Ribbentrop*, the foreign minister, as a "failure" and, together with *Göring*, as a "brake on the National Socialist development of the war," the latter certainly being true in some respects. See *Goebbels,* Diaries, II, vol. 13, p. 208, entry dated August 3, 1944.

[71] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 13, p. 143, entry dated July 23, 1944.

[72] Cf. *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 13, p. 143, entry dated July 23, 1944.

to be bombarded, even though it was clearly recognizable as such. Large-scale attacks such as the one on Dresden no longer pursued any military objective, with industrial and military facilities being spared from destruction. Since it was almost impossible to defend oneself or respond with counterattacks, Goebbels suggested to Hitler after the Dresden attack that, in retaliation for the crimes of the air war, a proportionate number of Western prisoners of war in German hands should be shot, one for every ten Germans killed. Ribbentrop personally succeeded [in]talking Hitler out of this step, which was also mentioned at the Nuremberg trials.

The foreseeable end of the fighting did not necessarily mean an end to the killings. In the spring of 1945, presidential advisor Samuel Rosenman mentioned a figure of twenty million Germans to be killed in London.[74]The first guidelines of American occupation policy, in particular the grotesquely low food rationing of far less than a thousand calories, still bore clear traces of such plans. Taking this into account, a controlled Sovietization of Germany could appear to be a pleasant prospect. Ribbentrop himself was to take steps even before the end of the war to obtain from the USSR, in return for surrender, at least conditions that would spare "the German people the worst." The Western Allies had refused any contact for years and demanded, with unconditional surrender, "free disposal of land, liberty, and life," as Churchill put it. This included the claim and intention to commit in Germany, in a comprehensive manner, what a few years later would be incorporated into international law as crimes against humanity, but which had already constituted war crimes before that. It did not make matters any better when London, in a clever display of double standards, relied on the fact that these crimes would preferably be carried out by the Soviets. Churchill sympathized with the idea of establishing indirect rule in his own occupation zone, while the Russians "could do exactly what they wanted in the East."

---

[73] See *Bloch*, Ribbentrop, p. 461. *Ribbentrop* approved and demanded punishment for Allied pilots who had been proven to have participated in crimes during the air war. Several conferences were held in the summer of 1944 to discuss the modalities, but no agreement could ultimately be reached between the armed forces and the Foreign Office. Although the strategic bombing campaign against Germany was, in terms of its nature and objectives, a war crime under international law at the time, proving the individual responsibility of individual pilots remained a problem.

[74]*Carl Burckhardt* passed on this figure in a private letter: "Colonel *Rosenthau*, (a name combination of the two American government officials *Rosenman* and *Morgenthau*, accidentally put together by Burckhardt, author's note) one of the American bigwigs at the Nuremberg Trials, said to a Swiss party leader in London in the presence *of Laski*: '20 million Germans must die.'" *Carl Burckhardt* to *Heinrich Rothmund,* letter dated January 23, 1946, quoted here from *Stauffer,* Jahre, p. 355.

[75] Cf. *Kettenacker*, Friedenssicherung, p. 496.

what they want, i.e., to deport the population, wring their necks, or exploit them," the British Foreign Office said as early as September 1943.[76] Senior officials adopted this view as their own. They wanted to reliably shift the blame for the mass crimes and genocide that had to be committed in order to achieve Britain's war aims onto the Soviets:

> "I think that all these population transfers will only be feasible if they
> 1) be carried out by the Russians, who will be prepared to act ruthlessly and will not adhere to any agreed rules or norms; and
> [2]) if the Germans are sent to Siberia, where they will be forgotten, and not to an already overpopulated Germany, where they could spark constant agitation for a return to their homeland."[77]

Although East Germans were spared transport to Siberia, ultimately it was indeed possible to blame the crimes of expulsion mainly on the USSR. At least, these were the thoughts that the Western enemies of Germany had about the future of Germany. The only thing standing in the way of such plans was the declining effectiveness of the German armed forces – or perhaps German foreign policy after all. Ribbentrop had once successfully negotiated with Stalin and, in view of the looming scenario, considered it possible or even necessary to do so again.

For some members of the resistance in the military and the Foreign Office, however, the opposite was true. Some military leaders toyed with the idea of clearing the borders and fronts in the West and defending themselves only against the USSR, without fully considering the political consequences of such a stance. Others in the Foreign Office, such as Hellmuth James von Moltke, were already consciously considering, even before the Allied landing in France, allowing Germany to be overrun from the west without resistance and without any military ulterior motives, and leaving everything else to the decisions of the Western powers.

In early summer 1944, Hitler himself was still pondering, or perhaps pondering with renewed intensity, how everything had come to this. He had not sought this war, nor any other major European war, which he had already said at the end of August 1939 would be "difficult, perhaps hopeless." A few days after Orme Sargent—who, as we have seen, had been involved in the decision in 1939 not to take action against the impending German entry into Prague—wanted to send the Germans to Siberia, Hitler presented Goebbels with the final results of his investigation into the causes of the war in early June 1944. Even after the new investigations, it sounded very familiar:

> "He (i.e., Hitler, author's note) has now had material studies carried out which show that the English plutocracy has been preparing for war against Germany since 1936, and

---

[76] Cf. FO 371/34460/C10982, quoted here from *Kettenacker*, Friedenssicherung, p. 281.

[77] Memorandum by *Sir Orme Sargent* dated May 30, 1944, in FO 371/39092/C6391, quoted here from
Kettenacker, Friedenssicherung, p. 456.

> the decisive and leading plutocracy. By this he means above all Churchill, Eden, and Vansittart, who never seriously toyed with the idea of bringing about a state of peace with the Reich. I consider these thoughts of the Führer to be correct in essence, but they are very strongly influenced by Ribbentrop."(78)

Exactly what these material studies might have been remains unclear. However, the mere fact that they were commissioned once again demonstrates the uncertainty within the Nazi leadership regarding political developments in the domestic politics of other states and their perplexity regarding the causes of the ongoing war, which they were convinced they themselves had not caused. The head of state and the propaganda minister then apparently discussed possible causes of the war and Minister Ribbentrop for quite some time, with Hitler allegedly showing some distance from Ribbentrop, even claiming to have considered dismissing him, but then describing him as a "cold-blooded tactician and intelligent manager" for whom there was no successor in sight.[79] In general, the year 1936 took on a kind of key significance in other news reports from 1944. Hermann Noé, an acquaintance of Carl Burckhardt, delivered a message from the Swiss High Commissioner to Goebbels:

> During a conversation in 1936, Churchill accurately predicted the course of the war, including that German cities would be completely destroyed by the Anglo-American air force in the course of a new war. Churchill also foresaw America's entry into the war after two years. Noé emphasizes that all the leading men in England agreed that Ribbentrop's activities in England would inevitably lead to war in the long run."(80)

As Ribbentrop reports, Churchill had already announced to him at that time that Germany would be destroyed if it became too powerful. In fact, Churchill's first statements about using National Socialism as an opportunity to destroy Germany can be traced back to 1934.[81] Churchill's first statements, according to which the mere

---

[78] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 12, p. 410, entry dated June 6, 1944.

[79] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 12, p. 411, entry dated June 6, 1944. A similar discussion between *Goebbels* and *Hitler* took place again in January 1945, with *Hitler* once more blaming *Churchill* and his "Tory opposition" for the failure of *Ribbentrop's* mission to London, which *Goebbels* again questioned, only to concede that *Churchill* had already "expressed before the war that he harbored no hatred toward the German people," but that this people was a "deadly rival" and "must therefore be destroyed." See *Goebbels,* Tagebücher, II, vol. 15, p. 254, entry dated January 28, 1945.

[80] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 14, p. 131, entry dated November 1, 1944. Possibly a confusion with *Ludwig Noé,* the general director of the Danzig shipyard, who traveled to England several times in 1937/38, among others with the Danzig Gauleiter *Forster*, and also spoke with *Churchill* about political matters. See CHAR 2/340 B, p. 140, letter from *Noé* to *Churchill* dated July 21, 1938. For Noé's biographical background and these trips, see also *Burckhardt,* Mission, p. 170 f.

[81] "He welcomed *Hitler*," *Churchill* told former Reich Chancellor *Brüning* during one of his evening discussions in 1934. Not out of sympathy, of course, but because "Hitler had turned the whole world against Germany." See *Brüning*, Briefe, I, p. 31.

The idea that Germany's existence as the German Empire was a problem dates back to before 1914. The problem with Germany, in the eyes of those members of the English leadership whose political tradition Churchill represented or believed he represented, lay in the alleged contradiction between the mere existence of the empire founded in 1871 and traditional notions of balance. The year 1936 was indeed the year in which these circles began preparing for a possible English war on a political and journalistic level, as Ribbentrop had correctly described in his final report as ambassador. In the meantime, "war weariness" may have spread in England, as Burckhardt reported via Noé. Perhaps this attempt at contact was also an attempt to persuade the now very weakened German Reich – with the elimination of the controversial figure of Ribbentrop, as Burckhardt demanded – to surrender without further British losses.

Threatening to pursue a policy of hinting to one enemy side that, if necessary, one could allow oneself to be overrun by the other was a balancing act. Ribbentrop, as representative of the Foreign Office, once again sent Kleist to Stockholm for talks with the Soviets in order to remind Stalin, in the above-mentioned sense, of the unpleasant consequences of an Anglo-American victory, as Goebbels noted.[82]Goebbels clearly had illusions about the scope of possible control options in the event of a unilaterally declared defeat and expressed his anger at the lack of response to Ribbentrop's latest attempts in his repeatedly noted desire to replace Ribbentrop with himself. Himmler, Bormann, and Guderian apparently wanted to achieve the same thing. Goebbels freely attested to his own "elegance, energy, and necessary flexibility," which would then enable "more intelligent warfare in the political arena." ([83])He did not have any concrete ideas about what this meant, at least he did not mention them in his notes and thus to posterity. [A] memorandum from Goebbels to Hitler dated a few days later, in which Ribbentrop's replacement was demanded and peace with the USSR was propagated, did not provide any details and revealed an astonishing inability to put himself in Stalin's shoes.

In January 1945, Hitler once again prevented Ribbentrop from attempting to establish contact with the British.[85] This was preceded by the formulation of comprehensive language guidelines, which Ribbentrop sent to German diplomatic missions abroad after the Yalta Conference, accompanied by a trip by Legation Councilor von Schmieden to American offices in Switzerland and Consul von Moellhausen to the British Embassy in

---

[82]See *Goebbels,* Tagebücher, II, vol. 13, p. 419, entry dated September 6, 1944. In the same vein, the entry dated September 12 states that *Ribbentrop was* now "feverishly" trying to establish Soviet contacts via the Japanese and Spanish embassies. Ibid. p. 461.

[83] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 13, p. 512 f., entry dated September 18, 1944.

[84] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 13, pp. 536–542, entry dated September 21, 1944.

[85] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 15, p. 199, entry dated January 23, 1945.

Spain. [86]The fourteen-page language regulation attempted to urgently impress upon the Western powers the consequences of further Russian military successes, especially if they were to simultaneously implement their announced policy of extermination and destruction against the German people, its industry, and its current ideology:

> "The biological weakening of the German people would destroy the only biological factor in Europe that, as this war has clearly demonstrated, can still counterbalance the enormous Bolshevik Slavic masses in the East. ...
>
> The intended destruction of German industry would eliminate the factor that, in material terms, is above all capable of providing at least some counterweight to the enormous economic and military potential of the Soviet bloc.
>
> The elimination of National Socialism and its worldview would remove the only factor that ... racially (sic) counterbalances the strong Slavic influence and politically counteracts the spread of communism and Bolshevism to the West."[87]

This once again raised issues that would dominate world politics for decades after 1945. Without German cooperation, Europe could not defend itself militarily or economically against the USSR. The Western powers also recognized this after a few years, allowing West Germany, which they controlled, to rearm and permitting its economic miracle and baby boom. But this development only took place after years and under different ideological circumstances. Some recipients of Ribbentrop's memorandum in Western diplomatic circles probably even considered his assertion to be correct, namely that "in the long run, the national forces in Germany can only be represented by National Socialists."[88] But even the more benevolent among them did not conclude in the spring of 1945 that cooperation was necessary, but rather that all Germans would have to be disempowered and re-educated for years to come. The less benevolent, including Franklin D. Roosevelt's entourage, literally considered a policy of mass killing and deindustrialization.

Ribbentrop further considered it appropriate to reiterate that any German aspirations for world domination were merely "enemy propaganda." Germany desired nothing more than to remain within its ethnic borders.

---

[86] According to *Reimer Hansen*, citing *Fritz Hesse*, whom he accuses of providing false information regarding the content of this official line. See *Hansen*, Friedensfühler, p. 719.

[87] Full text of the "language regulation," which is preserved as an attachment to an unsent letter from *Ribbentrop* to *Dönitz* dated May 2, 1945, in: *Hansen*, Friedensfühler, pp. 725–730. [88] Cf. *Hansen*, Friedensfühler, p. 729. It is not entirely clear to what extent this was intended to mean the continuation of the regime. For details of the "domestic political and economic issues in Germany," *Ribbentrop's* notes refer to another "language regulation" on this subject, which has not been preserved. This means, at the very least, that according to his ideas, issues of German domestic policy were also to be discussed with the Western powers. which would in any case have caused a change in the conditions in the Nazi state.

Every additional day of warfare would weaken England in particular and strengthen the USSR. An arrangement based on ethnic boundaries could be reached immediately. If nothing of the sort were to come about, the strongest power in Europe would prevail, and that was the USSR. At the end of the war, Fritz Hesse, a name associated with the attempt to prevent the outbreak of war in 1939, reappeared. Ribbentrop also sent him to Stockholm to establish contacts with the West. Hesse was not the only one entrusted with such matters.

4. Looking under every stone

Friedrich Berber claims that Ribbentrop summoned him on November 28, 1943, to send him on a mission to Switzerland. Carl J. Burckhardt had asked Berber for support so that direct communication between the German and British governments could be established in case the British wished to make contact. Ribbentrop was prepared to seize this new opportunity if the British government was indeed "weary of war." The minister had received this information from Burckhardt. ([90])Berber, for his part, did not think much of these rumors, but he did not dismiss them entirely:

> "Ribbentrop's hopes for contact with the Western powers had to be regarded as largely illusory, but by no means utopian; in the history of foreign policy, the most improbable developments and changes have repeatedly become reality."[91]

In fact, Germany suffered a long series of defeats in 1943. It stretched from Stalingrad to North Africa to Kursk and also included the defection of Italy, Germany's ally, and the Allied landing in Italy. On the other hand, this could also mean, at least in theory, that the Western powers would use their current position of military strength to explore the possibility of regaining the Balkans, Italy, all of Western Europe, and Scandinavia immediately and without further fighting. This could be presented to the public as a victory, especially if it could be complemented by the restoration of independent state structures in Poland and Czechia. Perhaps the Western public, weary of war, would be willing to accept such conditions, especially since the high losses during the landing in Italy and the months of stagnant progress there reminded the West that regaining Western Europe would require either a negotiated agreement with Germany or a perhaps even more distant

---

[89] This received widespread coverage in the press. See *Goebbels*, Tagebücher, II, vol. 15, p. 525, entry dated March 17, 1945.

[90] Cf. *Berber*, Conscience, p. 118.

[91] Quoted from *Berber*, Conscience, p. 118 f.

more lustful invasion of France. Otherwise, there was a threat of either the status quo or the conquest of the continent by Soviet forces.

Berber's contacts with Burckhardt, in Western foreign government circles, and ultimately with Ribbentrop himself, were based on his work for an informal group that had been established early on. As early as Easter 1933, Berber had established contacts in England and formed a group at the turn of the year that included several "Quakers and their associates," among them Horace Alexander and two members of the English House of Lords, Lord Buxton and Lord Allen of Hurtwood, who could be considered a confidant of then-Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald. In his memoirs, Berber states that the purpose of the group was to raise awareness about anti-National Socialist activities. Horace Alexander and he wanted to use England as a base to educate people about the dangers of National Socialism, which, according to Berber, made a war between England and Germany likely. The focus was on the persecution of Jews and, more generally, the concentration camps that had been established. The necessary financial resources were provided and the group was founded, but at the turn of 1933/34, there was a change of plans because Berber was not allowed to remain in England and was sent back to Germany.

> "I was to return to Berlin and do my part of the work from there, in particular to try to establish contact with Hitler so that the group could gain influence over him."(92)

Berber tackled this difficult task head-on. He went to Berlin to see Chancellor Lammers and told him about the new group. He was then referred to the Foreign Office, where he met the then Ministerial Director and later Ambassador to Washington, Dieckhoff, who declared the Foreign Office incompetent on the grounds that concentration camps were "internal affairs"[93] and sent Berber to Rudolf Hess, the "deputy Führer." Hess ultimately referred Berber to his England advisor, a man who was still largely unknown to the public at the beginning of 1934 and who still had to share his office with his secretary—Joachim von Ribbentrop.

> "Ribbentrop listened to my report on our group and asked me to keep in touch with him in future on all matters concerning the group, rather than with the Foreign Office."(94)

Thus, the future foreign minister had gained another of those informal contacts that he considered important for his political work in England.

---

92 Quoted in *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 67.

93 A meeting between *Berber* and British cabinet member *Malcolm Macdonald* yielded the same information; the British government declared this to be an internal matter and did not wish to comment publicly. See *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 81.

94 Quoted from *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 68.

and which he now attempted to draw on again in the midst of the war. [95] In his final report as ambassador, he had already mentioned the "Berber Group" as politically valuable, not by that name, but by naming the leading figures from the English House of Lords. He himself had arranged a meeting between Hitler and Lord Allen of Hurtwood and acted as interpreter. ([96])Berber himself states that he did not have any political background discussions with Ribbentrop, who, however, often called him on various matters. This is probably why the opposite impression of a relationship of trust with Ribbentrop prevailed at the time, which he did not contradict for reasons of expediency. After all, Ribbentrop made a number of positive statements about Berber, and we also find Berber repeatedly involved in the foreign minister's initiatives until his departure for Switzerland. [Even] his originally intended meeting with Hitler finally came about through the mediation of Ribbentrop's office, namely through Count Dürckheim, albeit only indirectly as an accompaniment to his English friend Arnold Toynbee, who was considered a world-renowned philosopher of history at the time and had undertaken a lecture tour of Germany in March 1936.

The motives of Berber and his English contacts appear to have been rooted in humanitarian and religious concerns. In addition to Horace Alexander, a well-known pacifist, these included Corder Catchpool, who had spent two years in English prisons during the First World War for total refusal to serve in the military and who had been involved in all kinds of humanitarian causes in Germany in the 1930s. Catchpool, with whom Berber was in regular contact, believed in the possibility of correcting the excesses of the Nazi regime without necessarily working towards its overthrow. Instead, he tried to understand the motives of the National Socialists, not only taking on political prisoners such as Carl von Ossietzky, who was in prison, but also attempting to determine the reasons for the course of events, right up to Hitler himself, although he was not granted access. Nevertheless, the mere attempt earned him a place in the 1935 pamphlet "Germany Unmasked" written by the English journalist Robert Dell. The pamphlet presented former opponents of National Socialism who had allegedly become defectors or at least indirectly supported Hitler. Dell wrote:

---

[95] We have seen above that *Berber* was also involved in drafting peace proposals to the British government in the summer of 1940.

[96] See *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 80.

[97] *Toynbee* also raised the issue of concentration camps with *Hitler* and received a promise – which was kept – to be flown in the "Führer's plane" to visit the Dachau camp. *Toynbee's* impression was that conditions there were "good" following a recent reform. See *Berber,* Gewissen, p. 83. According to *Götz Aly*, the total number of people imprisoned in camps in Germany at that time was 4,761, "including alcoholics and criminals." See *Aly,* Volksstaat, p. 27.

> A typical case in point is Mr. Corder Catchpool, who lives in Berlin and converted to Hitlerism after being arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis. He then held meetings in many places in England, explaining the reason for his change. The main reason seemed to be his discovery that Nazis have ideals. ... The members of the Society of Friends and many other religious people are influenced by the belief that there is something good in every human being, which is probably true. They say we should try to find out what is good about the Nazis rather than what is bad."([98])

Strictly speaking, however, after his arrest in April 1933[99] Catchpool had merely realized that he could not achieve anything in Germany if he continued to avoid all contact with the ruling party and its officials. From then on, he sought to establish contact with Hitler personally, but also with Hess, Göring, and Himmler, although he was unable to get beyond their respective secretariats. As a result of these efforts, however, he was able to establish contact with Hans Thomsen, who was working in the Reich Chancellery at the time and later became the German ambassador in Washington until the outbreak of war.([100]) This contact, like the one established with Baron Friedrich von der Ropp[101] as part of the peace efforts of 1940, because through the Quaker community in Washington, Thomsen and the British ambassador Lord Lothian established the contact that made it possible to present the British government's peace offer, drafted by the German Foreign Ministry, to the British government. Among others, Berber had drafted it on Ribbentrop's behalf and with Hitler's approval of its contents. We will come back to this later.

In fact, with these convictions, Berber and Catchpool's group had given the German foreign minister the impression that, beyond political maneuvering, they could at least offer the beginnings of a fundamental understanding between England and Germany, even under the Nazi regime, and that they also had considerable contacts in the English establishment. It might therefore have been worth trying to send Berber to neutral Switzerland in 1943 to revive these contacts. Berber himself emphasizes—quite rightly, it seems—that he regarded the project primarily as a humanitarian mission in view of the political situation.

Peace talks did indeed fail to materialize. Berber therefore attempted – unsuccessfully – to establish internationally recognized, bombing-free protection zones for German civilians on German soil in Geneva. The Allies took the position that there would be no bombing of civilians. Conversely, from Switzerland, he urged Ribbentrop to evacuate Hungarian Jews to international territory, for example by ship, which

---

98 Quoted from *Dell*, Germany, p. 17 f.

99 The immediate cause was his demonstrative visit to Jewish shops and establishments on the day of the boycott of these shops on April 1, 1933. See *Hughes*, Friend, p. 84 f.

100 See *Hughes*, Friend, p. 100 f.

101 See *Hughes*, Friend, p. 115 f.

Ribbentrop also suggested this to Hitler, but Hitler is said to have rejected it for technical reasons:

"How do you imagine that working? Do you think it's possible? No one will accept it. Besides, it's not technically feasible."(102)

Count Folke Bernadotte also spoke to Ribbentrop about humanitarian matters. As already mentioned, Ribbentrop had his wallet brought to him. Since Bernadotte gave Ribbentrop the rare opportunity to speak with a man who was known to have access to the highest Allied decision-making circles and who had just come from the headquarters of the American forces in Europe, Ribbentrop took the chance to explain his view of the situation to the Swede. In a tour d'horizon from August 1939 to November 1940 and the summer of 1941, he described how the current situation had arisen from his point of view. He then laid out the dangers of a Sovietization of Germany to Bernadotte, finally telling him bluntly that if the Western powers did not see reason, Germany could also consciously take this possibility into account.[103] This followed the threatening scenario that had been built up over the previous months and was apparently taken seriously by Bernadotte. Ribbentrop repeated this threat during a second conversation with Bernadotte on February 21, 1945, as Bernadotte reported. Bernadotte again reacted dismissively and apparently ironically to the announcement of a possible Sovietization of Germany and Europe. "The Swedes are so blinded that they would applaud the Russians if they dropped bombs on Stockholm," Ribbentrop commented on this attitude at a diplomatic reception a few days later.

The announced efforts to achieve a German-Soviet reconciliation were not entirely empty threats, as Ribbentrop apparently succeeded in the following weeks in persuade Hitler for the first time in years to agree to a foreign policy concept that actually involved the USSR, but was based on assumptions about Germany's own military capabilities that had long since become unrealistic and still hoped for peace if the USSR were to be granted the rest of Eastern Europe except for parts of Poland, Hungary, and Croatia

---

[102] See *Berber*, Gewissen, p. 127; *Hitler-Ribbentrop* conversation, see IMT, XV, p. 464. It is well known that *Adolf Eichmann* then offered the Allies the transport of one million Hungarian and other Jews to Western countries in exchange for the delivery of ten thousand trucks. The Allies refused.

[103] Cf. *Bernadotte*, Das Ende, p. 25 ff.

[104] Cf. *Studnitz*, Diarium, p. 262, entry dated March 8, 1945. *JvR* had already accused Sweden of "blindness" in September 1941. At that time, he had told the Swedish chargé d'affaires *Erik v. Post* about the demands for access to the Baltic Sea on the Swedish coast that *Molotov* had presented in Berlin in 1940. Referring to the German position, which alone would prevent any development in this direction, it was not possible to achieve a change in Sweden's policy of neutrality even then. See ADAP, D, XIII/2, Doc. 364, *Post-Ribbentrop* conversation of September 28, 1941.

admitted. With the "backing of the East," the "Anglo-Americans" were then to be repelled. [105]

Traces of these debates can be found in the statements Hitler dictated to Bormann during this period. On February 26, 1945, he once again justified the attack on Russia in 1941 by citing Soviet intentions to attack, stating that "I had no other choice but to eradicate Bolshevism by force of arms."[106] At the same time, however, Stalin earned recognition ("is undoubtedly a realist"). Hitler then named "the meticulous demarcation and observance of spheres of interest" as the "cornerstone of a lasting understanding" with the USSR, which in practice, however, would in any case resemble a Cold War: "An understanding in constant readiness and with a finger on the trigger."[107] Six weeks before the end of the war, this was pure fantasy, but Ribbentrop apparently succeeded in at least getting the USSR interested in talks. After all, from Moscow's point of view, decisive territorial gains could be made in Central Europe right now if it were possible to motivate the Germans with some kind of promises or hopes of increased defense in the West. As the military situation developed in those days, the Western powers would easily be able to take Berlin and advance to the Oder-Neisse line if they so desired. On March 21, however, Hitler again forbade contact with a Soviet representative waiting in Stockholm.[108] According to Walter Hewel, Hitler had put himself in a cultivated mood of doom by listening to Wagner records and did not want to jeopardize his expected posthumous fame by showing signs of weakness at the last moment. [109] Ribbentrop had now finally had enough and wanted to give up:

> "I assure you, it is the deepest disappointment of my life. What is the point of me continuing to play the role of Foreign Minister? Since 1941, I have been forbidden from holding any talks with foreign countries, and now that everything is over, now that there is once again an unexpected chance to spare the German people at least the worst, it is simply rejected. I will report to the front, as I am no longer of any use."([110])

In fact, Ribbentrop sought to go to the front in the days that followed, without having been formally transferred. Regardless of such political maneuvering, the German lines continued to be defended more strongly in the east than in the west. A week after these events, however, the American commander-in-chief Eisenhower relieved the Russian leadership of some

---

[105] Cf. *Goebbels*, Tagebücher, II, vol. 15, p. 485 f., entry dated March 12, 1945.

[106] Cf. *Trevor-Roper*, Diktate, p. 115.

[107] Cf. *Trevor-Roper*, Dictations, p. 116.

[108] See *Goebbels*, Diaries, II, vol. 15, p. 566, entry dated March 21, 1945.

[109] *Hitler's* instruction reported by *Hewel* is recounted by *Fritz Hesse*. "It's all pointless. Anyone who still talks to the enemy is a traitor to the cause. We will fall in the fight against Bolshevism, but we will not negotiate with it." See *Hesse*, Vorspiel, p. 338.

[110] Quoted from *Hesse*, Vorspiel, p. 337.

Concerns about this matter. On March 28, he wrote personally to Stalin, stating that he did not want to attack Berlin. Stalin, "undoubtedly astonished that a general would approach a head of state on such an important matter," announced to Eisenhower that he would not do so before the end of May—and immediately instructed his top military commanders to schedule the attack for mid-April.[111] To be on the safe side, he also wrote a letter of complaint to Roosevelt a day later, on March 29, urging alliance solidarity, as the Germans, with their partial surrender negotiations with the Western powers, would seek the opportunity to withdraw troops to the east, thereby insidiously dividing the Allies and pursuing goals "that affect the fate of Germany.". [112] The letter also clearly expressed the – in this case unfounded – concern that the Western powers would occupy and permanently control Germany, an option that the Soviets would probably have chosen in the reverse case.

The Ribbentrop-Bernadotte talks made little progress except on humanitarian issues. As far as the Allied headquarters had given Bernadotte any political instructions, they were clearly aimed at ignoring and circumventing Germany's existing foreign policy decision-making center, i.e., Ribbentrop and Hitler. Instead, the SS leadership had been identified as the only possible interlocutor, at least in theory, for the controlled transfer of power in Germany. This was correct insofar as Himmler and Co. were indeed the only institution that could implement a plan agreed with them in Germany. The Swede was obviously not sufficiently informed about some of Ribbentrop's information, although interestingly, this already hints at the future view of history that the Allies implemented in the post-war trials against the German leadership. Ribbentrop's factually accurate remark that Sweden had only avoided becoming a war zone in 1940 because of the German landing, as the British government had actually planned,([113]) was dismissed in his memoirs as merely an "original point of view." After five years of war, the West and apparently also neutral countries no longer wanted to know exactly how this war had actually begun and by whom it had been extended to neutral countries. Ribbentrop

---

[111] Cf. *Kissinger*, Reason, p. 444 f.

[112] Cf. *Laufer*, Documents, p. 557. On April 3 and 7, *Stalin* sent further letters of similar content to *Roosevelt*. Ibid. *Laufer*, Documents, p. 557 ff.

[113] The captured orders for the British forces deployed for the landing, documented in the German white papers, provided for a march through Sweden. This was also noted by Under-Secretary *Alexander Cadogan* after a cabinet meeting: "I attended Cabinet at 11 for discussion of question of our intervention in Scandinavia. Agreed to make representations, as suggested by the French, to Norway and Sweden, but decided we might go further and 'switch the war into Scandinavia', i.e. offer to assist in protecting the Swedish iron mines – which would mean 'protecting' them also against Germany." Quoted from *Cadogan,* Diaries, p. 239, December 22, 1939.

Trop had reminded him of this in order to emphasize his willingness to engage in dialogue. Since it was not Germany alone that had arbitrarily expanded the war, it should be easier to find a basis for discussion. Bernadotte was unable to respond to this, for which he was by no means prepared. When Ribbentrop finally asked him whether he had "any concrete proposals for improving the situation," he merely referred to his upcoming meeting with Himmler and concealed his specific intentions regarding negotiations on the evacuation of Scandinavian and Allied prisoners from German camps.

[114]According to his own account, *Bernadotte* then had *Schellenberg* inform *Himmler* that the Allies were willing to enter into a kind of transitional agreement if *Himmler* publicly succeeded Hitler, immediately dissolved the NSDAP, and then no longer resisted the further advance of the Western powers. See *Bernadotte,* Das Ende, p. 70 f.

XII. Fiasco

On April 22, 1945, Ribbentrop spoke to Hitler for the last time. In addition to the task of somehow reestablishing contact with German foreign missions outside Berlin, Hitler gave him a few more instructions. It was the same old topic, as they were intended for the event of German-English negotiations. Ribbentrop later passed on the content to Churchill and Eden as instructed, received no reply, of course, and then at least passed on the message to posterity in the context of the Nuremberg Tribunal.[1] The instructions were divided into four points, similar to those Hitler had dictated to Martin Bormann. A certain recovery could only take place in Germany if the decision-makers in the Western capitals recognized the benefits:

> "1. The urgent necessity of preserving German unity, also in the interest of England, since a European balance of power could never be restored if Germany were to be divided or if the eastern half or more were to be ruled by the Soviet Union.
>
> 2. Preservation of the nation states in Europe as a whole and their possible partial joint guarantee by the great powers.
>
> 3. Within this framework, the establishment of the closest possible German-English cooperation, which may and must eventually lead to the closest possible union with the British Empire, with London as its center. The form this would take is irrelevant.
>
> 4. Preservation of the national elements in Germany, since it is mainly these that England and the USA must rely on to maintain the European balance."[2]

Here, a piece of the postwar order was already taking shape, the development of which could hardly be influenced by Berlin or Germany in general. This applied to the current government, but also to any opposition or émigré circles, insofar as they had maintained any distance from the Allies. Instead, the United States in particular was banking on a zero hour in Germany, which, among other things, was to bring about a total break with all German political traditions. The formation of a new elite in the prisoner-of-war camps had already begun for the reconstruction of Germany. For

---

[1] Cf. Defense files in the Nuremberg State Archives, Rep. 502 AXA 122, "*Ribbentrop's* proposal regarding a move by *Sir David* Maxwell-Fyfe," the British representative of the prosecution. Here n. *Krywalski*, Transcripts, p. 744.

[2] Quoted from *Krywalski*, Transcripts, p. 744.

Penalties ranging from expropriation, imprisonment, and professional bans to immediate execution after identification were discussed for the former German elites. A trial was to be held for the more well-known names, and not only for known National Socialists. Joachim von Ribbentrop, about whose alleged belligerence extensive disinformation had been spread for years, was also on the list of defendants.

Ribbentrop made a peculiar impression at the Nuremberg trials. Observers generally agreed that he appeared to have aged considerably and seemed like a broken man. Some trial reporters considered his defense to be relatively weak, and he sometimes accepted the prosecutors' deliberate disparagement without resistance, citing his poor health. The trial had less of a legal than a political function. This included the personal discrediting of the defendants through psychoanalytic diagnosis – as if their actions were to be judged primarily in terms of medical criteria – and, in Ribbentrop's case, through his discrediting as a "yes-man" and corrupt businessman. The foreign policy expert with his own ideas, who had waived his salary when he took office, became a person who, in court, was conscientiously and systematically addressed only as "Ribbentrop," without his title of nobility, without "Minister," without even "Sir."

It can be said that Ribbentrop, as so often after his entry into high politics, found himself caught between two stools: the old National Socialists, the generals, and the bourgeois functionaries of the National Socialist state apparatus. The latter succeeded in part in portraying themselves as powerless, ignorant, or remorseful and were acquitted or received comparatively lenient sentences, such as Franz von Papen, Hjalmar Schacht, and Albert Speer. Hermann Göring, but also Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl, on the other hand, each fought in their own way not for their lives, but for their reputations, as Keitel once said. Their death sentences had already been decided. Ribbentrop may have seen his case in a similar light, but he spoke like someone who still had hopes for life after the trial, as well as the foreign minister defending his former policies under these more than unfavorable conditions. On the other hand, the total discrediting of former German foreign policy as a conspiracy to wage war of aggression was a central goal of the Allied prosecution. The lawyers of the victorious powers present in the courtroom acted as legislators, prosecutors, and judges in a single role in order to achieve this goal, and they also pulled out all the stops to prevent a fair trial. In addition to the aforementioned dual role, a few other important points should be mentioned here:

– Application of a law that was not in force at the time of the offense;

– Restriction of the validity of the newly enacted law to a single group of persons, i.e., exclusively to German offenses;

– Presentation of evidence under false pretenses regarding its origin;

– Prosecution of persons against better knowledge;

– Obstruction of the defense by applying agreed procedural rules and refusing access to files;

– Rejection of exculpatory material submitted according to a plan agreed upon before the start of the trial;

– Intimidation of witnesses;

– Preventing witness testimony by refusing to provide information about the witness's whereabouts.

The extent to which this misconduct was unavoidable, intentional, or a consequence of poor trial preparation and the suspension of all protective measures due to the constant confrontation between Anglo-Saxon and German law was also discussed in émigré circles. In view of the overall panorama and the history of the trial, in which all these things were agreed upon, it must be assumed that it was intentional. During the Nuremberg trial, Ribbentrop's defense was comprehensively obstructed. Nevertheless, he defended his policies without reservation whenever the opportunity arose, for example, against the Soviet prosecutor, General Rudenko.[4] There he gave a compromised summary of the motives behind German foreign policy and war policy, which was essentially supported by the facts, as we have seen.

In fact, the Western powers and the USSR pursued a policy of power politics that contributed to the war and, from the fall of 1939 onwards, a policy of prolonging the war that neither offered any compromises nor took any German proposals for compromise into consideration. This was accompanied by a policy of war expansion by the same states, which left the German armed forces and their commander-in-chief with only two choices: either to wait for the military counterparty to make its move and then react, or to take action first. It remains speculation whether the political benefits in the former case would have outweighed the military damage. The Nuremberg indictment attempted to reverse this entire chain of causality at this level and turn forced German countermeasures—the enforcement of which had been publicly celebrated by leading politicians of the Western powers at the time—into unprovoked aggression.

---

[3] See *Stiefel*, Juristen, p. 187.

[4] Cf. IMT, X, p. 479 ff., session of April 2, 1946.

(5) For example, *the* Balkan War, as described by the British ambassador in Washington and former foreign minister *Halifax*: "In the case of Greece, we were well aware that we could not provide the brave Greeks with forces comparable in strength to those that the Germans would deploy against us. But this war will continue for a long time ... and therefore there were reasonable military reasons for un-

was due to its political purpose. From a legal point of view, this approach was worthless and did not set a precedent, as the major states continued to refuse to recognize international jurisdiction over their affairs. The same does not apply to historical research, which can analyze the Nuremberg trials as an expression of power relations and use them as a source of historical details.

With regard to Germany, the central issue in this war was whether its European neighbors were prepared to tolerate the existence of a Germany within the borders of 1939 with its claim to spheres of interest in Eastern Central Europe, or not. The "defendant Ribbentrop" had casually addressed this point with his reference to the ambiguity of the term "aggression." In his final report as ambassador at the end of 1937, he had warned that British aggression against Germany was looming. As we have seen, there were indeed indications of this. It was obvious that the German policy of quickly taking advantage of opportunities for revision in Austria and Czechoslovakia in order to deter an English attack could also be interpreted as "aggression" in a broader sense. The redrawing of European borders and the disappearance of entire countries was bound to reinforce other territorial ambitions, such as those of Poland and Italy. This was a side effect of German policy, which was itself shaped by Germany's experiences with the Allies after 1919 and by a general mistrust. The whole scenario of 1938 and 1939 was ultimately conducive to fueling Soviet hopes for the further expansion of the revolution and to increasing the conviction in the United States that American world policy should also set the standards in Europe.

Aggression can generally be defined as a policy aimed at reshaping the political order to the detriment of another country. In this sense, there are varying degrees of aggression, up to and including armed aggression. The Nuremberg Tribunal blocked the path to an analysis of such connections. The whole undertaking could have become an innovative opportunity in international law if an independent court had applied its statutes to all states and politicians. This was never intended and would also be unrealistic in a world that has no general and independent international justice system. In this respect, the Nuremberg Tribunal

---

Our intervention. We knew that *Hitler* was trying to avoid fighting in the Balkans so as not to interrupt the steady flow of goods from these countries, which were so important to him. The fact that an enemy wants to avoid a certain action is generally a good reason to force him to take that action." *Halifax* on April 25 before the Atlanta Bar Association in Atlanta, Georgia, quoted here from ADAP, D, XII/2, Doc. 419, p. 638. *Hitler* promptly picked up on this in his speech on May 4, 1941: "Minister *Halifax* is correct in stating today that it was not Germany's intention to provoke a war in the Balkans." Quoted in *Domarus,* Speeches, II, p. 1701.

court into a lesson. The motives and actions of Germany's enemies in the war went unmentioned. At the end of 1937, Joachim von Ribbentrop had warned of a possible British war of aggression against Germany, which could be presented to the British and international public as a war of defense. In a sense, the Nuremberg trials were the fulfillment of this prediction. Now Ribbentrop himself was sentenced to death as a conspiratorial aggressor and, like all the other death row inmates convicted in the main Nuremberg trial, was hanged. He paid dearly for the temptation to help shape a new beginning for the German nation at a decisive moment – as did Germany as a whole for this temptation.